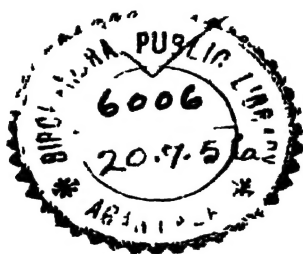


HAVOC BY ACCIDENT

Georges Simenon

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
STUART GILBERT



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TALATALA

CHAPTER I

‘Do you hear, Georges?’

Her husband, who was just bringing a glass of beer to his lips, gave a slight start.

‘What?’

‘Ferdinand says that the only way to quench one’s thirst out here is to drink tea – as hot as one can bear it.’

‘I know that.’

‘Then why do you drink beer?’

‘Because I don’t like tea.’

‘That’s your fourth bottle to-day.’

‘Have I counted up the cigarettes you’ve smoked since breakfast?’

Trying to repress a smile, Ferdinand Graux looked away, and met the eyes of the old Englishman from Nairobi; the twinkle in them told him that their owner understood French and was following the conversation.

Where was it taking place, this little conjugal squabble at the tea-table? Already it was hard to realize what stage of the journey had been reached. Unless one made a mental effort, one had an impression that it had been going on for weeks and weeks, though in actual fact it had begun only on the previous day – at two in the morning, it is true.

The scene of this particular tiff was Assuan, but, Graux remembered, there had been a previous one at Cairo, over the tip.

‘Do you hear, Georges?’

And her husband, as usual, seemed to be coming out of a dream when he barked out his:

‘What?’

'Ferdinand says we needn't tip the waiter. Everything's included in the fare, hotels and board and tips as well.'

As a matter of fact, Ferdinand Graux had first noticed this quaint little couple long before they took the air-liner. At Marseilles, an hour before the steamer sailed, he had seen a small, bird-like, excitable young woman dash on board, followed by a panting mother and a worthy-looking old fellow in his Sunday best, her father evidently.

At the time he hadn't noticed her husband, who was probably down in the purser's office, settling up for the voyage. The young woman, however, was very much in evidence; one kept running into her on deck and in the corridors, in saloons and smoke-rooms, doing her parents the honours of the ship.

All three shed tears when the time came to say good-bye. At first Graux had supposed the young woman was the wife of one of the Colonial Army officers on board, whose rank entitled them to First Class passages.

Then came a gap. Graux had paid no more attention to her. His idea of an agreeable sea-voyage was to be left in peace, and, following his invariable practice, he settled down with a book in his deck-chair in a secluded corner of the boat-deck. His first two days at sea were spent in the perusal of the three hundred pages of a book entitled: *Statistics for an Economic Survey of the Post-War Decade*.

How was it he had come in contact with the little bird-like woman? After some thought it came back to him. One afternoon while he was reading she'd planted herself beside his chair and stared first at him, then at the book in his hand. Though they were in the western Mediterranean and the month was May, she was sporting a new and quite unnecessary sun-helmet.

'Good lord! I understand why you look so glum if you always read stuff like that!' And noticing columns of figures, she added: 'Are you an accountant?'

Graux shook his head.

'Then what's your job?'

'I'm a coffee-planter.'

'You don't mean it!'

He could picture her running up to her husband, who was playing cards on the bar-terrace, and announcing:

'Do you know, Georges? That man who always keeps to himself – guess what he does!'

She was young, not more than twenty, and had the rather ~~“ashed-out~~ complexion of the city-bred girl. On board ship ~~she~~ seemed pathetically out of place, and spent her days hunting round for congenial company. Her husband, who had already got into white drill suits, passed most of his time playing *belote*. The more select coterie on board took no notice of her, and played bridge from morn till bed-time.

Obviously she resented being 'out of it', and she paced the decks indefatigably, buttonholing stewards and ship's officers. On the fourth night out she badgered the purser into getting up an after-dinner dance on deck. When it began, Graux retreated to his cabin.

On landing at Alexandria he supposed he had seen the last of them. Brushing aside the swarm of native porters milling round him in a cloud of dust, he walked straight to the Imperial Airways bus.

And whom should he find seated in it but the little woman and her husband!

'Taking our plane?' she cried at once.

He had a better right to call it 'his' plane, considering that for the last six years he had been travelling in it, in both directions.

'You haven't met my husband yet, have you? Georges Bodet, Assistant Commissioner at Niangara, in the Belgian Congo.'

'I've been there.'

'What? You know Niangara? ... Do you hear, Georges?'

That was the first time Graux heard that shrill 'Do you hear, Georges?' of which he was to be so heartily sick before their journey's end.

The Airways bus halted outside a big hotel and the little woman twittered:

'I say, do let's sit at the same table. All the others are English and I shan't understand a word. Do you speak English?'

'Yes.'

That was enough to start her off again.

'Do you hear, Georges? ... Didn't I keep on telling you you should learn English?'

Poor Georges! Each time she addressed him in this way he winced, lowered his eyes, and kept silent.

A very fair young man of about twenty-five, he was already beginning to run to fat. He had done three years in the Congo Civil Service, at Matadi, and had employed his first leave in getting married.

'What! Drinking again, Georges?'

There was no question he drank rather heavily - but always beer, glass after glass of it, with the result that he usually seemed half asleep.

'What shall we do this evening? How about having a look at the native town? It must be awfully quaint. Tell me, Monsieur Ferdinand ...'

Only twenty-four hours had elapsed since then, but already she had dropped the 'Monsieur' and was calling him 'Ferdinand'.

'And you must call me "Yette". My real name is Henriette, but that doesn't suit me a bit, does it? Much too prim and proper, and I'm not that sort at all. Folks have got to take me as they find me. I was born at Paris; my people live in the Boulevard Beaumarchais, near the Bastille. Do you know it?'

Her expansiveness was almost embarrassing. She had told him all about her family in detail, and he knew now that her father was department manager in the *Magazines Réunis*, that

her mother was Belgian, and she had made Bodet's acquaintance when visiting her grandmother at Charleroi in Belgium.

But though he knew all that, and felt vaguely sorry for her, he had refused to accompany the Bodets on a nocturnal jaunt round Alexandria. He had preferred to go to bed, while the young couple, escorted by a native guide, set out to explore haunts of more or less ill fame.

At two in the morning the hotel came to life again. The native servants started banging on bedroom doors, and presently a dozen people had gathered round the tables in the restaurant, where only half the lights had been turned on, over a breakfast of bacon-and-eggs and marmalade.

'Are all these people taking our plane?' Yette asked in shrill surprise. 'Will there be room enough?'

She was pale and tired, and eyed the eggs and bacon with disgust. Even the *café au lait* displeased her.

'How horrid! It's condensed milk!'

Meanwhile the others, all of whom were English, were eating a hearty breakfast, in complete silence.

'I can't understand people stuffing themselves like that at two in the morning.'

Convinced that these foreigners couldn't understand her, she didn't trouble to lower her voice.

It was pitch dark when the Airways bus conveyed them to the aerodrome.

'Try to get a seat in the middle of the cabin,' Graux advised her.

'Do you hear, Georges?'

She elbowed her way to the front and was the first to climb the steps. There was a faint glimmer of light in the eastern sky. The engine had not yet been started up.

'Oh, look, Georges! D'you see how Ferdinand's dressed?'

For her it was a revelation. Hitherto she had always seen him in grey suits, which, with his glasses and his quiet manner, made him look very ordinary. This morning, however, he

was dressed like the Airways pilot: in khaki shorts which revealed his sinewy legs, a shirt cut on military lines, and a bush jacket.

'Why don't you wear clothes like that? They're much more sensible, and wouldn't get dirty like those white ducks you always wear.'

'Graux is his own master and can dress as he likes. I can't.'

The last words were drowned in the roar of the engine, which had just started. The chocks were pulled away and already Yette was clutching desperately the arms of her seat.

Meanwhile Ferdinand, as snugly ensconced in a corner as if he were in a railway carriage, was cutting the pages of another book: *Some Recent Theories of Production and Distribution*.

At six in the morning they landed on the Cairo 'drome, after all the passengers had craned their necks towards the windows for a glimpse of the Pyramids. In a reinforced concrete waiting-room another breakfast was served and everyone provided with a luncheon-basket containing sandwiches, oranges and a thermos bottle of hot tea

'You see, Georges - I wasn't sick after all!'

Graux knew that no one was ever sick on this part of the run. On the ground level it was beginning to warm up, and the glare off the sand made it necessary to wear smoked glasses.

'Are you married?'

'No. Or, I should say, not yet. My fiancée will be coming out to join me in three months' time, when the rains are over. We shall be married at Niagara.'

'Aren't you nervous about letting her travel all that way by herself? Georges would never dream of letting me do that; he's much too jealous.'

The shrill, high-pitched voice was getting on everybody's nerves, and the British travellers were casting far from amiable glances in her direction. In any case, they had been travelling together all the way from London and already had a day's

flight behind them – from Brindisi to Alexandria – and they had developed the usual clannish feeling towards new-comers. Moreover, owing to the presence of these three additional passengers, there were no spare seats on which to place their hand-luggage.

The plane took off again and climbed to six thousand feet. Beneath them lay the Nile, a ribbon of silver on the drab monotony of the desert. After little more than a quarter of an hour Yette began to show signs of discomfort.

Without a word Graux placed a little papier-mâché basin on her knees, and it was only just in time.

The heat was steadily increasing and the roar of the engine made conversation impossible. Bodet, whose face had gone a livid green, was summoning up all his will-power to keep himself from succumbing, and he managed to hold out till they came to ground at Assuan. There he hurried out of the plane and started looking desperately round him.

‘It’s behind the hangar!’ Graux shouted to him.

The hangar was no more than a wooden shed dumped down in the desert. Of the town nothing could be seen except some minarets twinkling in the heat-haze.

It was two in the afternoon and the heat was telling on everyone. The sand was scorching underfoot. As at the other halts, a buffet was provided, and it was here that Graux informed Yette that the best way to quench one’s thirst is to drink scalding-hot tea.

Which was followed by the inevitable ‘Do you hear, Georges?’

The old Englishman smiled. He was portly, silver-haired, and wore a well-cut light tweed suit. That was enough to place him. He was a business man, Graux felt sure, on his way to Capetown.

It was equally easy to guess the destination of another Englishman who, despite the high charge for excess luggage, had four rifles with him. He was going to Nairobi, big-game

shooting. And the young army officers, laden with golf-clubs and tennis-rackets, were certainly bound for Khartum.

Of the planter type there was only one representative: a thin, unkempt, middle-aged man accompanied by a woman in black, his wife presumably. Graux had heard him talking to the others about his apple orchard and cherry trees. Which meant that he was on his way to Kenya, where the climate resembles that of Europe.

Yette was feeling better after her experience with the basin, and some cups of tea.

'Well I must say I'll be glad of a nice long sleep at Khartum. When do we get there, Ferdinand?'

'We shan't get there to-day.'

'What? But the time-table says ...'

'I know. But I've done this trip many times, and every time, because of the wind, or air-pockets, or for some other reason, we've slept at Wady Halfa.'

'Do you hear, Georges? ... Is there a hotel there, anyhow?'

'Yes, a very comfortable one.'

That was so. When, at five in the evening, they landed in the midst of the desert, a motor-coach rolled up out of the blue and conveyed the travellers to a huge, immaculately clean building that looked more like a sanatorium than an hotel.

Set up by several pints of ice cold beer, Georges Bodet developed an unwonted energy and proposed a 'look round the town'.

'There isn't any town; only a village a few miles from here. You'll have to take a taxi.'

'Know what the fare is?'

'Two pounds.'

'Oh!'

Graux could see him working out what that would come to in Belgian francs. The English passengers settled down to bridge, while Yette started shrilly grumbling at everything -

the food, the drinks, and above all, the fact that the native servants didn't know a word of French.

'Really, considering we pay like everybody else, it's up to them to understand us.'

It got on her nerves, and her husband's too, to see the Englishmen taking no notice whatever of them, but keeping to themselves. That feeling of being 'out of it' was more than she could stomach. Perhaps she also realized that the flimsy, rather gaudy dress she had had made specially for the journey was more suited for a picnic on the banks of a French river than for a desert outpost.

'Do you know the Commissioner at Niangara?' she asked Graux.

'I've met him once or twice. My plantation is only sixty miles from Niangara.'

'Have you a car?'

'Yes, I couldn't do without one. It's waiting for me at Juba, where we leave the plane.'

'Do you hear, Georges? And what's he like, the Commissioner? Is he married?'

'Yes. I understand his wife is going to have a baby.'

'Then we shall get on together. I intend to have a baby too, though Georges says it wouldn't be wise – because of the climate, you know.'

Looking at her, Graux was inclined to agree with Georges. With all her vivacity, she was a delicate little creature, and he doubted if she would stand the climate, in any case.

'But I told Georges I'd made up my mind and he'd have to lump it. It's rotten enough for a woman out there, having nothing to do all day. If I don't have a child to keep me busy ... Anyway, I wouldn't mind betting there's one on the way.' She began to enter into details – Graux had the impression that she was deliberately out to scandalize him, or to display her modernity – while her husband frowned and lowered his eyes uncomfortably. She rounded on him. 'Why shouldn't I tell

him if I feel like it? I dare say you think it's improper and all that, but I don't care. I believe in being natural, so there!

The old Englishman was still smiling. His eyes met Graux's. And it was Graux who felt a trifle embarrassed ...

'You haven't told me yet. What's he like, the Commissioner?'

'You'll see.'

'Is he young?'

'Thirtyish.'

'Do you think he'll get on with my husband, and his wife will take to me? After all, we shall be the only Europeans there, shan't we?'

And, cautious as usual, Graux replied again:

'You'll see.'

'Is it a pretty place?'

How could one answer questions like that? She'd have to decide that for herself, obviously.

'What did you say you grew on your plantation?'

'Coffee.'

'Does it pay?'

'Well, not yet.' So far he had laid out over four hundred thousand francs on it without return, for though coffee plants come into bearing in their third year, it takes five years before the yield suffices for a profit.

'Have you any animals?'

'Yes, elephants.'

'Well, I never! Did you hear that, Georges? Do you keep them as pets, or what?'

'No, I use them for clearing my land.'

'How many have you?'

'Three. There's one, Tom Thumb his name is, who isn't even shackled, and comes to see me at breakfast every morning.'

They were sitting near the two bridge-tables. He was talking

less for the benefit of the Bodets than for himself, and perhaps still more for the smiling old Englishman who, every time he was dummy, quite frankly listened in to the conversation that was going on in French. That old chap, anyhow, knew Africa, Graux felt sure. For all his smiling ways there was little that escaped him, and, what was more, from the expression on his face when Graux referred to his plantation, he probably knew a good deal about the coffee industry.

Graux decided he would like to have a talk with him, and after the Bodets had gone up to bed he lingered on, hoping that the bridge-party would break up. But when he saw them cutting for another rubber, he too went upstairs.

Next morning they were called at three. At the early breakfast Yette still looked half asleep; her skin was shiny, she hadn't even washed or powdered her face.

'I'm sure I shall be sick again,' she moaned.

Five of the passengers succumbed to air-sickness that day, as the air was particularly bumpy, full of pockets, in crossing which the plane dropped abruptly several hundred feet.

Then came Khartum, and a big caravanserai in which once more no one knew a word of French. Yette was all the more exasperated as a number of pretty, well-dressed women invaded the hotel at tea-time.

'Those women must be crazy, dressing like that in Africa!'

And she was even more furious at dinner when she found herself surrounded by ladies in low-necked dresses and men in dinner-jackets.

The third morning came. It took an effort to realize that this was only the third day out. By now the nine English passengers were treating each other like old friends, and when Graux came down for breakfast, Yette, without thinking, said: 'Good morning, dear.'

None of them had much appetite that morning. Their eyes were aching. Bodet hadn't shaved.

They had transhipped into a hydroplane and were following

the course of the White Nile, which here widened out into broad reaches of smooth water.

'I'd no idea Africa was like this!' Yette exclaimed. 'We've hardly seen any niggers.'

'Don't worry! You'll see plenty soon.'

'We'll be at Juba this evening, won't we?'

'So the time-table says. But usually something happens which obliges us to stop at Malakal. There we sleep in army barracks.'

'All together?'

'No. You two will have a room to yourselves.'

Bodet was showing signs of annoyance; after all, he too had lived in Africa, but for his wife apparently that didn't count. It was always to Graux that she applied for information, and after eliciting it she would turn to her husband with her irritating 'Do you hear, Georges?'

It wasn't fair. Graux was his own master and had independent means. If he, Graux, had had to put in three years at Matadi as a junior civil servant, tied to his office, he'd have sung a different tune.

'I'd love to see his elephants. Do you know, he has a lion cub as well?'

Georges shrugged his shoulders, and gave her a sour look.

There were two halts of half an hour at filling-stations, where the passengers were given luncheon- and tea-baskets, and the usual thermos flasks of watery tea.

As Graux had predicted, they halted for the night at Malakal. During dinner Graux listened to what their pilot was telling the passengers at his table.

Yette noticed that they seemed excited and, turning to Graux, enquired:

'What's he saying?'

'Wait! ... There's been an accident.'

'Where?'

'Ssh!'

A few moments later he explained.

'It seems a plane crashed somewhere in the bush last night.'

'One like ours - with passengers?'

'No, a private plane, owned by Lady Makinson. She was travelling in it with a friend, Captain Phelps. They left Cairo at about the same time as we did.'

'Where were they going?'

'To the Upper Uele - about eighty miles from my place. There's an elephant farm there, run by an Englishman, quite a character in his way. Lady Makinson was going to stay with him. The plane was due there yesterday evening, but it didn't turn up, and no news has come through.'

'What did the woman want with a private plane?' said Yette disgustedly. 'Swank, I call it!'

The English travellers seemed greatly distressed by the news, and one of them, who may have caught and understood her last remark, threw Yette a hostile glance.

Next day it was the usual round; they were called at three, drank some cups of tea, and stuffed wads of cotton-wool into their ears to deaden the noise of the engine.

Gradually the desert became more level, and presently they were flying over a flat expanse of scrub jungle towards which at one moment they made a sudden plunge from an altitude of six thousand feet.

Yette was terrified. Unable to make her hear, Graux tapped her on the shoulder and pointed to the window. They were hedge-hopping across the bush just above an immense herd of giraffes and antelopes.

An hour later in the same way they stampeded a herd of elephants. Ferdinand hardly gave them a glance.

Yette was coming to admire him more and more. A strong, silent man! Just the sort she should have married. Behind the glasses his short-sighted eyes always looked so calm, so imperturbable.

'The niggers call me *Munde-le-na-Talatala*,' he had told

her. 'They'll give you a nickname too. All the whites have one.'

'What does yours mean?'

'The-white-man-with-the-spectacles.'

'Do you hear, Georges? And what was their name for you?'

Incautiously he came out with it.

'The-white-man-with-the-thirst!'

But Graux had not told the whole truth. Actually the blacks have two names for every European. One of these names is inoffensive and can be used in his presence. The other is used by them amongst themselves, and corresponds with their real idea of him.

Graux happened to know his 'secret' nickname, which as a matter of fact, was extremely difficult to translate. Roughly it meant: 'The-white-man-who-is-only-a-man-when-he-has-his-glasses-on.'

For the blacks are observant folk for all their seeming stolidity. When he took off his glasses, as he sometimes did, to clean them, the change in his face was amazing. All his self-assurance, serenity and masterfulness seemed to vanish, and he looked no older than his real age, which was twenty-eight. Indeed, Yette might have found in him something of her husband's shyness – or, rather, lack of confidence.

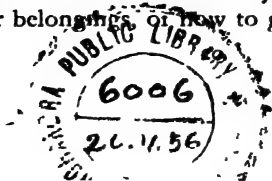
When at last they reached Juba it was five in the afternoon. Juba proved to be an up-country outpost of the usual type, with British officers in khaki and a group of half-naked Negroes gathered on the 'drome, and in the distance a few bungalows with red or grey roofs.

Here the travellers parted company, and Graux shook hands with the elderly Englishman, with whom he had not exchanged a dozen remarks.

'Has Lady Makinson been found?' he asked.

'No.'

The Bodets were all at sea. They had no idea what to do about their belongings, or how to get to Niangara. For this



was the first time that Bodet had made the trip by plane. He and his wife had only their hand-luggage with them; the rest was following on by sea, and for the next two months they would have to make do with little more than what they stood in.

They were still wandering about Juba, discussing ways and means, when a touring-car drew up beside them. Graux was at the wheel.

'Would it help you if I dropped you at the frontier of the Belgian Congo? I shall get there, with any luck, some time early in the night.'

Yette insisted on sitting in front beside Graux, and Bodet, much to his disgust, had to squeeze in at the back amongst the luggage. The road was fairly good, and every half-hour or so they passed through native villages, where at last she could see the naked Negroes she had heard so much about in Europe.

'Sometimes one comes across a lion on this road at night,' Graux told her. 'The headlights dazzle him and he can't move.'

'Isn't it dangerous?'

'No. After a bit he slinks off, or else he gallops along in front of the car.'

At last they reached Bodi, where the hotel was a wooden building of the bungalow type, set well back in a big park-like compound. They had just passed a frontier boundary-post, but Graux had not stopped the car.

'We'll fix things up with the authorities to-morrow morning.'

Here the atmosphere was much less formal than in the English hotels. The owner of the hotel, a small dark man with greying hair, chatted with Graux familiarly about his plantation, his elephants, and their common friends. Bodet became quite cheerful now that he had Belgian cigarettes to smoke and Belgian beer to drink.

Just before going to their room the Bodets showed signs of anxiety again.

'I'm afraid,' Graux said, 'that I can't offer you a lift, as I take a different road. But on Wednesday there's a bus to Niangara. It runs once a week.'

'When shall we see you again?'

'Perhaps next week, perhaps in a year's time!'

Graux slept in a hut in the compound; the Bodets in an adjoining one. When at six in the morning he started out, he had a glimpse through the Bodets' window of someone sitting up behind the big double mosquito-net.

From this point of his journey he was on thoroughly familiar ground. The headmen of the villages on his way greeted him as he went by. At the third village the headman signalled to him to stop, and informed him in the native dialect that a 'flying machine' had fallen in his plantation.

Obviously that must be Lady Makinson's plane.

With all their telegraphs and telephones the white men had not yet received the news; but thanks to their tom-toms the villagers along the road knew all about it.

Graux had some cubes of salt in his car, and he distributed them amongst the natives as one gives sweets to children.

He was really at home here; not merely in Africa, but in *his* Africa. And this Africa of his was very different from the great empty spaces flown over by Imperial Airways. Here were no hotels so white and scrupulously clean as to remind one of hospitals.

Like an exile coming home after long sojourn in far lands, he recognized familiar landmarks, familiar faces, stopping now and then to pat the head of a child whom he had cured of fever, or to enquire after the health of an old man tottering under a load of firewood.

No longer Ferdinand Graux, he had become once more Mundele-na-Talatala, bespectacled and self-assured, and he drove faster and faster, thrilled by the joy of nearing home.

Seventy, forty, thirty miles to go ...

A shower set in just as Graux turned off into a side-road

that he had had cut across the bush by his own men. Under the drizzle the brickdust-coloured soil had turned a tawny red, and the foliage on either side, faintly rustling under the drops, glowed a more vivid green.

The sky hung low, like a vast pane of frosted glass suspended close overhead, and the ground here was almost level. It was as if one were moving in a two-dimensional world, scaled down to man's stature. Sometimes the tall grass bordering the road-side parted silently, framing the dark, still form of a watching Negro. At long intervals a lean and leafless tree, usually a silk-cotton tree, rose above the level green expanse. Rarely did one see a native hut; yet there were huts everywhere, twenty or thirty yards back, in the bush, the only tokens of their presence being clumps of bananas, with long pendent leaves like elephants' ears.

Graux knew that all the way his passage was being signalled, that the green shadows of the wayside were full of watching eyes. The rhythm of the rain gradually quickened on the leaves and grass. A little Negro girl walked by, stark naked, sheltering her head with a big banana leaf. Evidently she felt the cold; he could see the brown silken skin quivering under the downpour.

And now, instead of hurrying on, Graux felt more inclined to linger on his way, and to steep himself in the elemental peace around him, a peace that actually seemed deepened by the presence of these simple folk living so near the soil.

Then a memory of his last homecoming brought a smile to his lips. At that time his assistant, Camille, a tall, lanky young man of yeoman stock, had been with him for only a year. In the contract Camille was described as his 'factor', and the young man had taken this description seriously. He hadn't realized the difference between the still rather feudal-minded part of France he hailed from, and the Congo.

So, when Graux came back from a short holiday in Europe, he had found all his native hands, over five hundred strong,

massed in front of the brick bungalow, which was beflagged for the occasion. Chinese crackers, a native band, a troupe of dancers – nothing had been forgotten – not even an address of welcome recited by a nervous little piccaninny.

For almost the first time in his life Graux had really lost his temper; had rounded on the well-meaning young man with a volley of abuse. So now, as he drove slowly through the market, the natives dared not make any great show of welcome. There were about thirty of them there, each sheltering his head under a banana-leaf umbrella as he squatted beside his simple stock-in-trade: little mounds of yams, batatas, and taros.

A dreamlike silence, punctuated by the soft patter of the rain.

Then, as a red brick wall came in sight, he saw two white men approaching.

CHAPTER II

THE very way he introduced himself was characteristic of the man. In the plane, for instance, not even the army officers from Khartum would have shown such perfect unconstraint when addressing a stranger for the first time.

‘I’m Phelps.’

‘I know ...’ was all Graux answered.

Because of the intruder, poor Camille couldn’t greet his employer as he’d have wished to.

‘So you know about our accident? Can’t think how you heard of it! We haven’t been able to get a word through to anyone. Your assistant’s motor-bike has broken down and ...’

‘A ball-bearing gone,’ Camille ventured to interpose. ‘So I sent a runner to Niangara. He should be there by now.’

‘In that case,’ Captain Phelps continued, ‘I expect you know that Lady Makinson is with me, and was injured in the crash. A dislocated knee. I’ve done what I could, but ...’

The three men walked slowly towards the terrace of the bungalow. Camille was wearing a dark brown homespun suit and leather gaiters, the costume of a French farmer out for a day's rough shooting. Captain Phelps was in a well-cut grey flannel suit.

'If you'll excuse me, I'll ask Lady Makinson if she can see you.'

As Phelps ran up the steps into the house, Camille murmured uncomfortably:

'I had to let her have your room.'

It was a big square building with a red-tiled roof, and a verandah running all round. Within, the walls had been left in bare red brick, and their only ornaments were shot-guns and rifles.

'Had a pleasant journey, sir?' asked Camille with a sigh; he was obviously distressed by the strange circumstances of this homecoming.

'Quite pleasant, thanks.'

Graux was smiling. He had just heard a faint rustle at the back of the building, and looking quickly round, he glimpsed the flutter of a white, blue-spotted dress.

It was Baligi, his housekeeper, hovering in the background, too timid to show herself.

'You saw it over there, didn't you?'

Yes, Graux had seen it. In front of the house the ground fell gently away towards a river. On the hillside, beyond it was the coffee plantation. Here and there a tree broke the monotony of the straight rows of bushes, but something else, that was not a tree, now reared itself above the foliage: the tail of a plane.

'I thought they'd been killed. I was tuning up the motor when it happened.'

Captain Phelps was still in the room occupied by Lady Makinson, and Graux patiently waited for him to reappear. He could see some twenty men at work round the fallen plane, and he cast a questioning glance at the young man beside him.

'I hope I did right, sir,' said Camille uneasily. 'We'd no sooner carried her here' – he gave a glance towards the closed door – 'than she asked me to get the plane clear as soon as I possibly could. Captain Phelps, who was only slightly bruised, went back to it at once. He wants us to clear a track up to the bungalow; it's the only place, he says, from which the plane can take off when it's been repaired. I explained that this would mean destroying at least three hundred five-year-old bushes ...'

Just then the door opened and, smiling with that easy grace of which he had the secret, Phelps announced:

'Lady Makinson will be delighted to make your acquaintance, and to say how grateful she is ...'

Camille stayed outside. At first Graux couldn't discover the bed; it had been moved to a new place and the light was dim, as the windows had been hung with makeshift curtains.

'Come in, Monsieur Graux.'

She spoke French without the least accent. Sitting up in bed, she was smoking a cigarette, and beside her lay a book that Graux recognized as one of his: *Captain Scott's Expeditions*.

'It must have been rather a shock for you finding us in possession like this, I'm afraid ... Jimmy, hand over your cigarettes.'

'They're all we have left, you know.'

'But I hope Monsieur Graux has brought a good supply with him.'

'I'm afraid I don't smoke,' he said awkwardly.

'Do you hear that, Jimmy? Which of us was right, at Cairo? I told you I wanted to bring a few thousand cigarettes, didn't I?'

'What about the place for them?'

'Oh, you could easily have left behind one of your guns, or a spare suit. Do sit down, Monsieur Graux. I hate talking to people when they're standing. Your assistant has sent a runner to Niagara. Think he's there by now?'

'If he left the day before yesterday, he should have reached Niangara early this morning.'

'So it'll be on the wireless, won't it, that we're safe and sound?'

'Most likely. I expect Niangara rang up Stanleyville, where there's a broadcasting station.'

'Let's hope Ronald didn't start off at once,' she said to Phelps, and hastened to explain to Graux: 'My husband's military attaché at the Ankara Embassy. At this time of year he's in Stamboul, with the children ... Jimmy, give me a light. And do sit down. You look so absurd towering above one like that when one's in bed.'

He was, in fact, a noticeably tall young man, broad in the shoulders, though otherwise sparely built. He had a very long face, with a high, narrow forehead, and a small toothbrush moustache emphasized the whiteness of his teeth.

'I hope you're not too angry with me, Monsieur Graux, for having annexed your bed. Really we've been extraordinarily lucky - Captain Phelps and I, I mean. Do you know the elephant farm?'

'Yes, I've had dealings with Major Crosby.'

'He's an old friend of ours. For years he's been asking us to come over for some big-game shooting. As I'd just bought a new long-distance plane, I thought it was a good chance of trying it out, and I took Captain Phelps, who's a first-class pilot, with me.'

Meanwhile Camille, no doubt, was waiting patiently in the hall. Graux noticed on a table near the bed a bottle of whisky and a thermos jug of iced water.

'We'd almost got there on the afternoon of the day before yesterday, when suddenly we ran into a cloud-bank. We were flying low, which made things worse, and it was getting on for sunset. We cruised round for an hour, looking for a break in the clouds. Now and then we hedge-hopped for some miles to try to get our bearings. That was how we happened

to notice your house. We circled round it for some time, trying to find a place to land. Finally we decided for that slope on the far side of the river. We came down as gently as we could, but, as ill luck would have it, we hit a tree and crashed.'

'I hope you weren't seriously hurt,' said Graux rather stiffly; for some reason, he wasn't feeling in form.

'I put out my knee, that's all. But it won't prevent us from starting off the moment the plane's repaired. Needless to say, we'll compensate you for all this inconvenience and the damage done to your plantation ... By the way, I suppose the people at Niangara will send the doctor at once?'

'Unless he's on tour up-country, as he is half the time. Are you sure your knee is dislocated?'

'Quite sure. I started when I was a kid by breaking my shin-bone, and ever since then I seldom get through the year without a sprain or two, if nothing worse. Oh, I know all about my legs, I assure you!'

Graux kept silent. And she, too, said nothing more – from which he concluded that the interview was over. Phelps moved towards the door, and Graux went out.

'See you presently,' said Phelps, who stayed behind in the room.

It was four in the afternoon. Camille, who had been waiting in the hall, took his pipe from his mouth and looked at Graux enquiringly.

The two men had known each other from childhood. Graux came of a well-to-do family; his father kept a large gunsmith's shop in Moulins and was a landowner in a small way. Camille was the son of one of his tenants, who worked a farm near Chevagnes. The boys were great friends in those days, and when Graux brought Camille back with him to the Congo, it was as much the young man's companionship he wanted as his services. But Camille had old-fashioned ideas, and for all his employer's affability could never bring himself to talk to him on equal terms.

‘What do you make of her?’ Graux asked.

‘All I know is that she’s a leading light in London society. It seems her husband was A.D.C. to the Prince of Wales for several years.’

‘I suppose the captain told you that, didn’t he? Look here! How do you think things are between those two?’

‘You’ve seen for yourself.’

‘No, I want your idea.’

‘Really I couldn’t say. He kisses her hand and treats her with the utmost respect. But she calls him “Jimmy” and finishes off cigarettes that he has started. I’ve given him my room, by the way.’

Quite half of the bungalow consisted of a big hall which served as living-room; behind it were only two bedrooms and a kitchen. Zinc tubs, which a boy filled with hot water brought in kerosene-oil tins, replaced a bathroom.

‘I’ve put my camp-bed here,’ Camille added.

‘I’d better do the same thing. Have mine brought here too, please.’

He smiled again; there had been a sound of someone moving in the kitchen – Baligi, no doubt, who must be wondering when her master was going to take some notice of her.

She was a fifteen-year-old Logo girl, already gracefully mature, the only native girl in these parts who wore more or less European dresses – though nothing underneath them.

Graux smiled because he had just recalled another ‘Do you hear, Georges?’ Where had it been? Probably that evening at Khartum, when they changed planes and had a longish halt. As usual, Yette was plying him with questions.

‘You mean to say you’ve lived five years all by yourself in the Congo, and been true to your fiancée all the time! Don’t tell me you’ve never made love to one of those pretty little black girls I’ve heard so much about!’

To which he had replied quite coolly:

'I have a housekeeper – like everybody else.'

'What does that mean, "housekeeper"?''

'It means – everything!'

He should have tumbled to it when he saw her cast a quick glance at her husband.

"'Everything?" Do you mean you ...?' For once she dropped her voice discreetly.

'Why not? In fact, it might be difficult to do otherwise.'

'What about that girl you're engaged to?'

'She knows, of course. I've told her.'

'And isn't she jealous?'

'There's nothing to be jealous about. When she comes out, my little housekeeper will get married to a native in another village.'

It was then she had come out with her shrill 'Do you hear, Georges?'

'Yes, I hear,' Georges muttered sulkily.

'Ferdinand, anyhow, is frank, and I admire him for it. What a fool I was to believe you when you told me you'd never even looked at a native girl!'

Poor Georges! Poor Yette! By now they were arriving in Niagara and making the acquaintance of Costemans, the Commissioner.

His thoughts took a new turn.

'How are the elephants?'

'Quite all right. Tom Thumb was a bit off colour last week, but he's got over it.'

Graux checked his impulse to go and talk to Baligt at once. Better not show too much eagerness.

'Let's have a look round,' he said, taking his riding-whip from its peg.

Why, like the sky, was his mind overcast to-day? Always in the past on his return from Europe he had revelled in these first contacts and, like a child on the first day of the holidays rolling ecstatically in the new-mown hay, had plunged himself

whole-heartedly into the life of his plantation, its atmosphere of plenitude and peace.

Rain was still falling, the sun still hidden. Nevertheless Canille was wearing his old, battered solar topee, while Graux had on a *terai* felt hat with a double crown which he had recently adopted as his headgear in the tropics.

There was a significance in this which had not been lost on the old Englishman in the plane, for instance. Of all the passengers, Graux was the only one who wore a double *terai* without the least romanticism or self-consciousness. For he was not a tourist, or even a settler; he was *at home* in Africa.

'How have the accumulators been doing?' he asked as they walked towards the river.

'One of the cells will have to be replaced; it won't hold the charge ... I've had the infirmary roof repaired.'

It was on reaching the foot of the slope that one realized for how little the bungalow counted in Graux's life; his true interests lay elsewhere. As there was an eighteen-foot waterfall near by, he had installed a turbine and a small power-house. Just behind it was a brick-kiln; then came a row of buildings: a store-house, the forge, the carpenter's shed, the office, the infirmary – all in excellent repair, with numbered keys in every lock.

Of the village nothing could be seen but the peaks of some black cones upstanding in the bush.

'She doesn't seem to be in pain, anyhow,' he suddenly remarked.

'Oh, she's been like that from the start. In fact, at first I couldn't believe it was anything at all serious. She never showed the least sign of distress, even when she was being carried on the stretcher. Of course, she says she's used to getting hurt ...'

'Who sees to her meals?'

'Captain Phelps. She won't eat anything that's been touched by a black woman.'

Graux would have found it hard to say just how he felt. Had anyone asked Camille to give his impression of his employer's present mood, he would have replied: 'He's in the dumps. Something must be worrying him.'

As a matter of fact, however, it wasn't worried that he felt. His state of mind was rather as it used to be at Moulins when his sister said to him, smiling:

'A penny for your thoughts!'

And his mother never failed to add:

'The truth is, Ferdinand's bored stiff at home. He's eating his heart out to be back in his beloved Africa!'

There was some truth in that. And yet everyone had welcomed him with open arms; they did their best to give him a good time. His sister and her husband, Dr Farget, arranged little dinner-parties to which all his old friends were invited.

'Is it very hot in the Congo?' someone would ask.

And it would send them into fits of laughter when he replied unthinkingly:

'Very hot? I really couldn't say. That depends ...'

'Are the black girls pretty?'

'Not too bad.'

'What do you do all day?'

That was a poser. All he knew was that there was enough to keep him busy from dawn till dusk. But to describe it was beyond him.

'Anyhow, you might tell us what your house is like.'

'Oh, it's an ordinary brick bungalow,' was all he found to say.

Again everybody laughed. And after a fortnight, though he had his fiancée's company, his one idea was to return to his plantation as soon as he decently could.

He would have made them laugh still more had he confessed that what he felt was, above all, a sense of insecurity, none the less acute for being quite irrational.

This feeling was nothing new to him; he had known it

even in his schooldays. The other boys had written him down a 'swotter' because he stayed shut up in his room for hours on end. And indeed he did work hard and always had some prizes handed him on speech-days. But he didn't work for working's sake. He found in work an escape from the outside world, a pretext for remaining shut within four familiar walls, surrounded by things that never changed.

No sooner was he out of doors than he grew conscious of a strange uneasiness, for which he never could account. If someone spoke to him his first impulse was to look away. 'What a shy boy!' some said; others, less charitable, called him sullen or conceited.

They were mistaken. He had the utmost admiration for his father, Evariste Graux, who was always to be seen, dressed in black, at the back of his big shop, or hobbling forward - he suffered from gout - as soon as someone entered. For, though he had three assistants, he believed in greeting customers himself.

'How are you, my dear Count? Were you at the Marquise's shoot yesterday?'

For all the local gentry bought their guns and cartridges from him, and his son was much impressed by the judicious blend of deference and bonhomie with which he handled them.

With the farmers, too, he always struck the right note.

'Well, Lucas, how's that lawsuit of yours getting along? ... I hear the rabbits have mopped up three of your lucerne-fields. That's just too bad!'

He was on friendly terms with the gamekeepers, to whom he allowed a discount, and with the poachers too, who always told him of their lucky bags.

But somehow Ferdinand, much as he admired his father's ease of manner, could never bring himself to say 'old chap' to anyone.

Talking of the dancers at the local cabaret, his friends always referred to them as 'the tarts'. But for Graux they were just

girls like any others, whom he could never address otherwise than as 'Mademoiselle'. Even for his fiancée, though they had known each other since childhood, he had no pet name.

She was the daughter of a notary, Maitre Tassin, who dined with Ferdinand's parents every Wednesday. In his fifteenth year he had a way of blushing every time he met Emilienne, who was then thirteen. Some years later it was rumoured that she was going to marry an officer in the Moulins garrison, but years had passed and the marriage had not taken place.

During his first holiday at home, after three years in the Congo, Graux had been rather surprised to hear his mother say one morning:

'Why don't you run round and see Emilienne? She never let a mail go by without enquiring after you. And she's such a nice girl, isn't she?'

That was how it had come about. So now he was engaged, and Emilienne Tassin was to come out to join him when the monsoon ended.

A sensible young woman of twenty-seven, she was as placid as Graux himself, and all their friends agreed that they were 'made for each other'. He had given her a list of books dealing with coffee- and vanilla-growing, and his pet subject, political economy, too.

'I say, I hope you don't mind my having had those plants cut down?' Camille ventured to enquire.

The silence had lasted so long that Graux gave a start on hearing a voice beside him. They were still standing beside the waterfall.

'Really they as good as ordered me to do it,' Camille explained ruefully, gazing at the broad red gash of naked earth that showed amidst the greenery: a track that would serve once only - to extricate the plane. After a moment's pause he added: 'Did you see my people?'

'Yes,' Graux said. 'I went to the farm. Your sister Hortense is going to have a baby.'

'So soon! And how's my father?'

'Much as usual.'

'Still drinking too much white wine, I suppose,' sighed Camille.

'Yes, he hasn't changed. It's wiser not to contradict him in the evenings. But he's a grand old chap, for all that.'

His mind kept harking back to thoughts of that woman and the young Englishman in his bedroom, and he felt a sudden, unaccountable rush of anger ... All the same, he asked Camille:

'Did you tell them I know something about doctoring?'

'No, I didn't dare.'

Graux had actually studied medicine for a while, and during the last six years had been giving medical attention to his workers and their wives. He had helped many of the women through hard deliveries, and once, when a Negro had had his arm mangled by a crocodile, had performed a successful amputation.

'By the way, is our old friend Potam still about?' His eyes strayed to the river, up-stream.

For three years a hippopotamus had been living there, and they had come to regard him almost as a pet. He was not really dangerous, though he had a taste for practical jokes, such as upsetting native dug-outs in mid-stream with a toss of his huge snout, and watching the blacks floundering in the water.

'I expect he's asleep by now. But you'll see him to-morrow morning.'

Suddenly Graux made up his mind, strode quickly back to the bungalow, and knocked boldly on the bedroom door. Captain Phelps opened it.

'Can I have a word with you?'

When Graux came, as he had just done, to a swift decision, he always said what he had to say with an extreme, indeed excessive bluntness, owing to the effort it cost him. The captain followed him on to the verandah.

'I want to talk to you about Lady Makinson. From what

she said I gathered that she was expecting the doctor to be here at any moment. Not only is it most improbable he'll come, as he is almost always out on tour, but she would do well not to have too much confidence in him.'

He was conscious of speaking in a rather stilted manner, and regretted it.

'Do you mean he's not a good doctor?'

'He may have been one in the past. But he's had too much to do with natives, and he drinks ... I haven't a medical degree, but I have a good deal of practical experience, as we have accidents here almost every day. If Lady Makinson feels she can trust my skill ...'

'Just a moment please.'

Like an officer of the Royal Household given a commission, Phelps retired to the bedroom, and for the next quarter of an hour Graux could hear a conversation going on inside, in undertones. The lamp had been lit, as it was six o'clock, and Baligi was moving things about in the kitchen, hoping to attract her master's attention.

All this waiting was beginning to tell on Graux's nerves, and by now he was regretting his offer of assistance. Really it was too absurd, hanging about outside his own bedroom door like someone soliciting an interview with a high official.

To while away the time he said to Camille, who had followed him:

'Go to the infirmary and fetch my first-aid outfit. And a couple of ampules of novocaine.'

Obviously 'they' couldn't make up their minds, and were dubious about his competence. At last the door opened.

'Would you come in for a moment?'

Lady Makinson was smoking, as usual, sitting up in bed with her back propped against two pillows. Graux noticed that she was wearing flimsy silk pyjamas that revealed the outlines of a slender body, small, tip-tilted breasts like a young girl's.

‘Leave us, Jimmy.’

She waited till the young man had shut the door behind him; then gave Graux a long, meditative look, blinking a little as the cigarette-smoke was getting in her eyes, and said:

‘Look away for a moment, please.’

He heard a rustle of silk and guessed that she was slipping off the pyjama trousers.

‘I’ll see at once if I can have confidence in you. Come ...’

The sheet was drawn up nearly to her waist, uncovering two long, slim legs, one of them bandaged at the knee.

‘Now carry on. Wait! Give me a cigarette.’

She smoked with little nervous puffs while he undid the bandage. Then, looking up, he said:

‘I sent to the infirmary for some novocaine. I propose to give you an injection.’

‘All right ... But do hurry up!’ she added fretfully.

He went to the door and shouted for some hot water.

‘Perhaps the captain might give me a hand ...’

‘No!’ she said peremptorily, without adding any explanation.

‘Very well.’

She was smoking still more nervously, and now and again gave a little sigh.

‘Am I hurting you?’

‘No.’

She was thin, her skin tanned golden brown, and the play of the long lithe muscles could be seen beneath it.

‘I’m afraid it may hurt a bit now – but only for a few seconds.’

‘Oh, dry up!’ she exclaimed impatiently.

She held out valiantly till he had finished. As he was fixing splints half-way up her thigh, he had to push back the sheet a little, and thoughtlessly remarked:

‘Excuse me!’ and blushed. His thoughts were out of hand.

and his one desire was to get it over quickly. Then he heard her say:

‘When do you expect to get the plane up here?’

‘I’ll put two elephants on the job ... Within three days at most.’

‘Be as quick about it as you can, please.’

Which meant presumably that she was impatient to get away. He straightened up. She asked for a looking-glass and began settling her red-gold hair.

‘And the comb, please. Thanks. No, wait a moment. Ask Captain Phelps to come.’

As he approached the bed Phelps threw her a questioning look and she said at once:

‘He’s made a good job of it, I think.’

Meanwhile Graux was hurriedly removing his paraphernalia: rolls of dressing, the hypodermic syringe, the empty ampule, the basin of hot water.

‘Please let me know what you’d like to eat.’

‘Oh, Jimmy will fix that up with you.’

He must have cut rather a pathetic figure, seen from behind, as he was walking out of the room, for Lady Makinson called after him in a friendly tone:

‘Thanks again, Monsieur Graux. Really you managed awfully well.’

‘She’s crying,’ Camille said in a low tone from which he couldn’t exclude a hint of reproach.

‘Let her cry!’

They were dining together in the hall; the surroundings brought to mind a shooting-box. Phelps had just gone by, carrying on a tray a tin of jellied chicken and a bottle of claret.

‘The English’ – thus Camille always referred to them – were dining *tête-à-tête* in the bedroom, the door of which had a

rather aggravating habit of closing again the moment it was opened.

Phelps had grinned as he walked by with the tray.

'What do you think of the new butler?'

Their dinner began, as it always did, with soup, followed tonight by a fish netted that afternoon in the river. When they had finished the soup, Baligi did not come as usual to take away the plates and bring the next course, so Camille had to go to the kitchen.

It was on his return thence that he mentioned that Baligi was crying.

When Graux replied: 'Let her cry!' he did something Camille had never seen him do before; he planted his elbows on the table. And when Baligi brought the soup, he had merely grunted an absent-minded 'Evening, Baligi,' and the indifference of his tone had cut her to the quick.

Now and again they heard a stifled sob, and Camille shot a timidly disapproving glance at his employer.

'No, it wouldn't do,' Graux murmured, as if talking to himself.

'What wouldn't do?'

'They're English. They haven't the same ideas as we about such things.'

'I don't follow.'

'About Baligi, I mean. Try to explain to her, please. Anyhow, they won't be here for more than two or three days.'

For some reason he was reluctant to go into the kitchen himself and explain things to his little 'housekeeper'. Camille could do it just as well. And of course it was out of the question letting her come and join him here in the hall during the coming night.

'Are all the English so damned prudish?' asked Camille, with a glance towards the closed door.

'Well, if they have dealings with native girls they keep it dark.'

'Just what you'd expect of them!' sneered Camille, making no effort now to conceal his ill-humour.

For this upset to their domestic life was getting on his nerves as well. He had been hoping for some news about his people, and Graux had hardly mentioned them.

'By the way, didn't my sister give you a letter for me?'

'Yes, it's in my suitcase. I'll fish it out to-morrow.'

'To-morrow! Under normal conditions they'd have got down to it at once and had a memorable evening opening suitcases, unpacking the odds-and-ends Graux had bought in Europe: presents for Baligi, for Camille, for old Uaraga, Baligi's father, who after three years' training had at last learnt how to run the power-plant.

And Graux hadn't even thought of telling Camille whether he had succeeded or not in getting the bounty he had applied for on his coffee!

'What time do they go to bed?'

'I haven't the least idea. All I know is that they stay together till midnight or one in the morning. And I can count myself lucky if they don't wake me two or three times in the night, to get them ice. Last night Phelps hauled me out of bed because there was a big spider on the ceiling. And they wouldn't let me kill it - I had to throw it out of the window - because Lady Makinson has some silly superstition about killing spiders.'

Camille stopped abruptly, frowning: he had just heard another sob in the kitchen.

'Go and tell her.'

'What shall I say? That because of "the English" ...?'

'No, don't bother. I've got it.'

He rose and drew back the grey blanket on his camp-bed.

'Are you turning in?' Camille asked. 'Shall I put out the light?'

'Do, please.'

The hall was plunged in darkness.

Graux called, 'Balil' – it was the pet name he had given her – in a low voice.

The joints of Camille's camp-bed creaked as he stretched his lanky limbs. A dim form flitted through the gloom. There was a faint rustling, then silence fell, broken only by the sound of breathing, and all was darkness but for a thin ribbon of light beneath the bedroom door.

CHAPTER III

THOUGH Graux kept his eyes shut, sleep would not come to him. As clearly as if they were open, he saw, or seemed to see, that line of light under Lady Makinson's door. And then, quite suddenly, it went out.

He might easily have supposed that, without knowing, he had fallen asleep and dreamt this; but he was certain of the contrary and could even fix approximately the time when the light disappeared – eleven o'clock.

Now and again Camille, who was sleeping soundly at the other end of the hall, would heave himself over so ponderously that the camp-bed seemed on the point of breaking down. Each time he made this movement he gave a snort, as if it cost him a prodigious effort.

As for Baligi, no one could have said whether she slept or not. Curled up into a ball, both feet pressed on her bedfellow's legs, she lay quite motionless; even her breathing was inaudible. But it was unlikely she was squandering such a rare, blissful hour as this on sleep.

Not long after the streak of light had vanished, Graux fell into a deep sleep. Suddenly he sat bolt upright in bed, staring in front of him with angry eyes.

'So sorry,' murmured Captain Phelps. 'I can't think how I came to do it.'

What had happened was this. On leaving Lady Makinson's room - Graux saw the time on his wrist-watch: ten to two - he had unthinkingly pressed the electric-light switch. And Graux in starting up had tossed the blanket aside, revealing the black girl snuggling up against him.

Hence Phelps's embarrassment, and apologies.

Hastily switching the light off, he went across to his room, while Camille, who had not waked up, rolled heavily over with the usual grunt.

Baligi was certainly awake, but holding her breath, afraid to stir; dimly conscious that what had occurred was the last thing that should have occurred. And Graux, too, was the prey of disagreeable thoughts; he let her stay beside him for another quarter of an hour, and then, as she had been expecting, whispered:

'Go back to the kitchen.'

For the mat on which she slept was on the kitchen floor, beside the oil-stove.

Equatorial nights are all of the same length. From one year's end to the other the sun rises at six. By the time Camille woke, Graux was already up and about, on his way to the elephant shed. The rain had ceased. The sun showed as an orange-yellow ball behind a veil of fleecy clouds, the puddles shone with broken gleams of light.

There was one thing that Graux really had against Camille, his disdain of cleanliness. He would go on wearing the same khaki shirt for days on end, and frequently forgot to wash. It was all the same to him sleeping with his clothes on, then going straight out to his work after no more than a flick of his face with a damp towel.

When Camille entered the shed he found Tom Thumb eating chunks of yam from his master's hand with every manifestation of delight. But Graux's thoughts were evidently elsewhere, for as soon as Camille came up he asked:

'Which runner did you send?'

'Maki. Last time he did the trip within the twenty-four hours. I suppose he's waiting there to get a lift back with the doctor or the Commissioner.'

At half-past six the clanging of a bell assembled the blacks outside the buildings on the river-bank, and Camille held an inspection in true military style, Graux remaining in the background. Only when the workers were about to be dismissed to their various jobs did he intervene.

'Turn them all on to getting the plane clear. Let's have done with it!'

Still looking worried, he climbed the slope to the point where the plane had crashed; its nose was buried in the ground. Taking a pick from one of his men, he himself cleared away the earth round the propeller, and soon discovered that it was broken. Shrugging his shoulders, he walked away, after casting a quick glance into the cabin, which was as elegant as the interior of a luxury car, with the seats upholstered in pale green leather.

When he reached the bungalow, Captain Phelps, immaculately dressed as usual, accosted him at once.

'Really I feel quite ashamed of myself,' he said with less than his customary self-assurance, 'making you sleep on a rotten camp-bed. I hope ...'

'Tell me!' Graux cut in almost rudely. 'Where was that plane built?'

'Near London. There's only one other like it in existence, Amy Mollison's.'

'Have you another propeller?'

'No, of course not.'

'In that case, will you kindly tell me how you propose to get her off again?' Though he tried to control it, there was a vicious edge to his voice.

'What! Do you mean to say the propeller's smashed?'

'It is. And I must say I'm surprised that though you've been here two days you haven't even troubled to inspect it.'

The young man visibly wilted. Of a sudden all his self-confidence had left him; one realized that, for all his jauntiness, he was really rather shy, and unsure of himself.

'I've just left Lady Makinson,' he said rather quickly, 'and I was coming to say she'd like to see you now, if it's convenient. She'd appreciate it very much ...'

Graux walked to the bedroom door, rapped on it, and walked in.

'Good morning, Monsieur Graux. I can't say how sorry I am for all the trouble we're giving you.'

Was it an allusion to Phelps's blunder with the electric-light switch? Graux's expression was far from amiable as he stared at the woman who was sitting up in the bed, with the remains of her breakfast on a tray beside her. She had already lit the inevitable cigarette.

'Do sit down,' she said.

'I'm afraid I've very little time. What I'd really like to know is – what exactly are your plans?'

He remained standing, an obstinate look on his face, and she observed him with surprise.

'Sorry. I don't follow.'

'I presume you know that your plane is out of action. The propeller's broken.'

'No, really?' She smiled faintly and slowly added, giving a curious look; 'In that case, I must wire to London for another one.'

He had an impression that she was laughing at him up her sleeve. She had guessed that he was out to be unamiable, and was amusing herself by trying how far he'd go.

'Provided, of course,' she smiled, 'they have one in stock. Let's see now. It should be here within a week, shouldn't it, if they send it by Imperial Airways? ... Do you know, you haven't asked me yet if I had a good night?'

He had the choice of two lines of conduct; he could give in – in other words, be his natural self again; alternatively, he

could persist in his ungracious attitude. He elected for the latter.

'I had no need to ask. Captain Phelps has let me know already.'

He glimpsed a little flash of anger in her eyes; for a moment she was on the brink of a sharp retort. Then she said quietly: 'Won't you really sit down?'

The sound of a motor-horn outside saved the situation. Hurrying out, Graux saw the Commissioner's car drawn up under the portico. A Negro in brown and yellow – a convict, that is to say – was at the wheel. A plump young man in white ducks scrambled out of the car; to his surprise, Graux saw it was Georges Bodet.

'So they sent *you*, did they?'

Captain Phelps, who had just come up, introduced himself to the new-comer with his usual punctiliousness.

Bodet was in a bad temper.

'It's been a filthy journey. We've been on the road all night and it's fairly swarming with wild animals, we could see their eyes glowing in front of the car at every turn. The nigger was almost more scared than I was, and he's a rotten driver at the best of times.'

'Why didn't Costemans come himself?'

Bodet shrugged a contemptuous shoulder.

'You didn't tell me the man's half crazy. Would you believe it; yesterday, my first day, he insisted on my attending office at six in the morning! When it was getting on for eleven and I started taking off my coat and tie, he yapped at me in that dreadful Brussels accent he affects:

"Where do you think you are, young man? This isn't a tennis court – it's a government office."

Graux called through the doorway:

'Baligil! Bring some beer out on to the verandah.'

Lady Makinson, who had no idea what was happening, called to Captain Phelps from her room.

'Is that the pilot?' Bodet pointed to the captain's receding figure; then shouted some orders in the native dialect to his driver, who handed him a despatch-case bulging with documents.

'Here's luck! ... This beer has saved my life! I was half dead of thirst.'

And of heat. He was streaming with perspiration, puffing and blowing. He gulped down the beer – which made him sweat still more profusely.

'When your runner turned up ...'

'By the way, where is he?'

'Oh, we dropped him at a village ten miles from here. He said he had a brother there he wanted to see. As soon as we got your message, Costemans rang up Stanleyville. It seems that since the beginning of the year no one has applied for permission to fly over the Belgian Congo, and consequently no permit has been issued.' He paused.

'Which means ...?'

'It means,' said Bodet dolefully, 'that I'm instructed to open an enquiry, and to prevent the plane from taking off till further orders.'

'That will be easy, anyhow. The propeller's smashed.'

'I've been given a whole list of things to ask. I wonder if you can tell me whether Lady Makinson has a passport with the necessary visas? I've also got to ascertain if they have any fire-arms and, if so, whether they have been issued with licences to bring them into this country.'

'How's your wife?'

'Fed up! Fed to the teeth! Yesterday she went to pay her duty call on Madame Costemans. And what do you think Madame Costemans did? She sent a message by the orderly to say she couldn't see her just then, and would send an invitation when convenient – or something like that. You know what Yette's like. She was waiting in the portico and could

hear them whispering behind the door. Well, she flared up and shouted:

““No, my good lady, you’ll never see me here again, not on your life!””

Gloomily Bodet poured himself out another glass of beer, after drinking which he rose with a sigh.

‘Well, I suppose I’d better go and interview Lady Makinson.’

Graux merely pointed to the bedroom door, then walked down to the little power-house by the river to inspect the dynamo and storage batteries.

He expected to be summoned back to the bungalow after a few minutes, and was surprised at having to wait so long. For a good hour he tinkered with the dynamo, after which he whiled away the time standing at the window, watching his coolies clearing the track through the plantation. The sun had pierced the clouds at last, but it still had no brightness and the light was more grey than golden.

He was in a mood which, though he couldn’t have defined it, he knew only too well. Behind it lay a feeling of suspense; worse than suspense, a premonition of evil. An inner voice was warning him of impending catastrophe – in the meaning he gave to that word. For, to Graux, any disturbance of the even tenor of his life, any event that shattered his peace of mind, was nothing short of a catastrophe.

And on such occasions his nerves were apt to go to bits and he would say or do the most preposterous things. For instance, just now, what was it he’d said to Lady Makinson ...?

He pulled himself up. Why was he dawdling here, pretending to tune up the dynamo? Suppose Camille had chanced to come in, he’d have blushed for himself; for Camille knew quite well the dynamo was running perfectly.

‘Coo-ee!’ The voice was one that invariably jarred on him: Captain Phelps’s.

Looking back to the bungalow, he saw Phelps making a speaking-trumpet of his hands, bawling at the top of his voice: 'Coo-ee! Hi there, Graux! Where have you got to?'

Without hurrying, Graux walked back to the bungalow. After a quick glance towards the bedroom door Phelps explained:

'Lady Makinson wants me to go in to Niagara myself and get off some telegrams. This understrapper they've sent here has been given the most ridiculous instructions, and Lady Makinson is going to complain to London.'

Looking crestfallen, Bodet came from the bedroom and signed to Graux to come and talk with him at the far end of the hall.

'She's in the devil of a temper! It seems she's a big shot in London society. But what can I do about it? I've been given my orders ...'

'Listen! Have you seen Captain Phelps's passport?'

'Yes.'

'What is he? An adventurer?'

'Not a bit of it. He's the son of the chairman of Phelps & Phelps, the big New Zealand merchants and shipowners. We passed one of their boats in the Mediterranean ... Ouf! I'm glad that's over!'

He put down another large bottle of beer before leaving, accompanied by Phelps, who insisted on driving the car himself.

The bedroom door was ajar, and Lady Makinson could be heard calling:

'Monsieur Graux! Are you there, Monsieur Graux?'

An involuntary smile rose to his lips as he entered the room. To his surprise, he saw her seated on the edge of the bed, the leg in splints held stiffly out in front of her.

'What on earth are you up to?' he exclaimed.

'Come and help me. Call that young man of yours.'

'First tell me what you propose to do.'

'I propose to go and sit with you on the verandah. I've had enough of this stuffy room. Where's he got to, your assistant?'

Between them they carried her to a big sleeve-chair, and she lay back in it for some minutes without speaking, with closed eyes. Graux took the opportunity of studying her face attentively.

Again he had that disagreeable sensation of being thrown off his balance. Yet he could look quite calmly at the grave beauty of the girl to whom he was engaged, or at his sister's merry, laughing face, or the faces of his girl cousins ... It was precisely for this reason - because he clung to preserving his mental balance and the thought of 'losing his head' had always been repellent - that he had never indulged in flirtations. He had once explained it quite frankly to Emilienne when she asked him if he had had any love-affairs before their engagement.

'No. I've had no love affairs. I've had dealings only with paid women.'

For there was nothing to fear from women of that class.

Lady Makinson's eyelids were so finespun, so translucent, that he could see the eyeballs fluttering, and even glimpse the pupils through them. Her no trils, too, were quivering, whether because of the effort she had made or because she was in pain, he could not judge.

Though she was frailly built, her frailness was not like that of the anaemic girls he had sometimes seen in France. On the contrary, one could see at a glance that she was strong and marvellously fit, her skin, tanned by the sun, had the warm glow of a ripe fruit.

But what amazed him most was the combination of maturity and youthfulness he discerned in her. He knew she had two children, one of them a girl of eight. But motherhood had not left its mark on her, as it had done on the women of his family. And indeed he felt more than wonder; he was vaguely

scandalized. Since his earliest days he had always regarded a woman who had had children as a being apart and sacrosanct; as if in becoming a mother she ceased to be a woman.

And yet – last night hadn't he seen the light turned out in her bedroom, and Captain Phelps emerging some hours later? Naïvely he wondered if the dusky rings round her eyes mightn't be an after effect of those dark hours.

– 'Still angry with me?' she asked languidly, her eyes still closed, a faint smile on her lips. But before he could answer she seemed suddenly to come out of a dream, and, with a toss of her red-gold hair, opened her eyes. 'Sorry! It's over now. I don't often lose my temper, but these wretched little bureaucrats with their red tape ... But I won't talk about that, Phelps has gone to Niagara to fix things up. To-morrow they'll be on the mat, eating humble pie ... A cigarette, please.'

She watched him as he brought the platinum cigarette-case, so flat as to seem incapable of containing even the thinnest cigarettes.

'Don't you ever smoke? No? And you don't drink either, I suppose. I should say you haven't much indulgence for the failings of poor ordinary mortals. Of women especially. You loathe me, don't you? Out with it!'

'You're greatly mistaken, Lady Makinson.'

'Oh, how serious you are! Sit down, won't you? And do try to stop being the model planter who can think of nothing but his precious coffee plants. Have you been here long?'

'Six years.'

'Always by yourself?'

'There's Camille.'

'He's a worthy young man, of course, but I shouldn't say his company's particularly inspiring. What do you do with yourself all day?'

He pointed to the plantation, to the elephants at work on the hillside, the row of sheds along the river.

'Only that?'

'I read a bit.'

'And are your books and your plantation enough to make you happy?'

'Yes.'

He said it so simply and with such conviction that she looked at him with keener interest, in which was a shade of wonder.

'Do you really mean that? Really and truly?'

'Yes.'

'And you don't want anything more of life?'

'Nothing.'

'Love, for instance?'

'My fiancée will be coming out in three months' time, and we shall get married.'

He would not meet her eyes, for fear she should see too deeply into his thoughts and feelings.

'Then it wasn't true, what you said just now. You *do* want something more.'

He was on the brink of saying 'No', but pulled himself up in time, and stared at the red-tiled floor, puzzled and dismayed. For he had just realized that, had he said 'No', it would have been the truth.

What he was out for above all was tranquillity, a stable course of life. For the moment he had been jolted out of his rut, but he knew he would settle into it again. If he was prepared to marry Emilienne, it was because he felt convinced she would fit in with his scheme of life. All the same, he ruefully admitted to himself, he felt no great desire to have her with him – now!

And it was worse when Lady Makinson added after a short silence:

'I wouldn't mind betting she's a cousin, or a girl you've known all your life.'

A girl he'd known all his life, yes; indeed, almost a cousin, for their families were connected.

'Why are you so sure of that?' he asked.

'Because that's how it was bound to be - with you.'

But why?'

'That's asking!' she smiled. 'Another cigarette, please. I'm sure the girl you're going to marry doesn't smoke ... Guess what Camille would have found if he'd rummaged in the cabin after we crashed! Two opium pipes and half a pound of opium. But of course all that is right outside your range. Yesterday, when you came in, Phelps and I had just been smoking opium, and you didn't even recognize the smell.'

Something prompted him to ask:

'What's the point of smoking opium?'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'None whatever.'

For the next five minutes they sat in silence, gazing at the red and green expanse beyond the river, dotted with small black moving forms. The coffee bushes in the distance looked no bigger than cabbages aligned in orderly green rows upon the brick-red soil.

'Would you get me my bag, please? It's under the pillow.'

It was in crocodile-skin, with an emerald clasp and a monogram topped with a coronet. She drew something from it.

'Look!'

Two children, a little girl of seven, a two-and-a-half-year-old boy, standing naked on a sunlit beach.

'That was taken last year, at Therapia. The Embassy is at Ankara in the winter; in the summer we move to Therapia, near Stamboul. Know it?'

'No.'

Again they fell silent, while she went on holding the photograph as if uncertain what to do with it. Finally she dropped it into her bag and abruptly snapped it to.

'I must say, you're a gloomy fellow!'

'I'm not, really.'

'Then what are you?'

'Oh, nothing in particular!'

'I say, will you be offended if I ask you something rather indiscreet?'

'Ask away!'

'I'd like to see your little black girl.'

Almost too hastily he rose to his feet and shouted, looking away from her:

'Baligi! Baligi!'

For some minutes there was not a sound. What could the girl be up to? Then, when they least expected it, they saw her standing shyly in the doorway, in her blue-spotted dress, the flimsy bodice of which was raised in front by the small, pointed breasts. Baligi cast a piteous gaze at her master.

'Don't be frightened,' he said in the native language. 'You're a good little girl.'

That set her smiling, and she even ventured a glance at the white woman.

'Does she speak French?' asked Lady Makinson.

Baligi herself answered the question.

'A little, madame.'

'That's clever of you, Baligi! Now will you go and fetch the bottle of whisky and thermos jug from my room?'

Graux had to confirm the order by a slight nod, and then the girl ran off the verandah almost dancing, though she had no idea why she felt so happy.

'A nice little thing,' Lady Makinson remarked when she had gone.

She poured herself out a whisky, and Baligi retreated to the kitchen.

'No use offering you one, I suppose?'

'No, thanks.'

'What are you thinking about?'

'My plantation.'

'That's a fib!'

'I assure you I was thinking about the preferential tariff and

the transport subsidies we've been promised. They're matters of vital importance for the planters in these parts.'

'You'll be glad to see the last of us, won't you?'

'Naturally you'll stay here as long as necessary.'

She uttered two or three words in a language unknown to him - Urdu, he suspected, remembering she had spent a good part of her childhood in India - then asked:

'Phelps should be at Niangara by now, shouldn't he?'

'No, not for an hour or so. It's a bad road.'

'Are there many Europeans there?'

'Four all told, and they're rarely there together. The Commissioner and his assistant - the young man who was here just now; the doctor, who's usually on tour; and the missionary, who spends most of his time on his motor-cycle, visiting up-country villages.'

'Do you go there often?'

'Once a year at most.'

'And how about the elephant farm? Do you ever visit Major Crosby?'

'Only when I want to buy an elephant, or to have his advice about a sick one. I've been there three times in six years.'

'Do you never see anyone from the outside world?'

'Oh, now and again - once or twice a year - somebody blows in.'

'Nuisances like us, who turn you out of your bedroom?'

'That's nothing. I'm used to sleeping in a camp-bed.'

'Making much money?'

'So far I've sunk four hundred thousand francs in the plantation, but with luck I'll get them back in time.'

'Are you keen on it?'

'On what?'

'On making money?'

'What I'm keenest on is selling my coffee. Especially if I can get it graded Standard B.'

‘Meaning?’

‘Oh, it would take too long to explain ...’

‘Thanks!’

‘I mean, I’d be afraid of boring you.’

Just then a bell rang. Lady Makinson gave a slight start.

‘A visitor?’

‘No, it’s for lunch. Captain Phelps left before he’d had time to arrange your meal, so if you don’t mind sharing ours, such as it is ...’

She shot him a defiant glance and, without thinking of her leg, made as if to rise.

‘Wait. We’ll carry you in your chair to the table.’

They could see Camille washing his hands at a tap, then damping a brush and running it over his unruly shock of hair.

‘Give me a hand, Camille.’

The table was covered with a red-and-white check cloth, in the centre of which stood a soup-tureen, enormous and ornate.

‘To avoid using tinned stuff we have soup twice a day. Will you try some?’

She observed two small white slip-cases, each embroidered with an initial and containing a napkin. Camille tucked his napkin into his shirt-collar. The spoons and forks, too, were marked with an initial.

It was almost cool in the central hall, surrounded as it was by the zone of shadow on the verandah, and the light was pleasantly subdued, tinged with a pink glow from the tiles and red-brick walls.

‘Were you your own architect?’

‘Yes, and my own mason, plumber and electrician, to a great extent. Have you had a look at my library?’ There was a hint of irony in his voice. ‘*The Home Encyclopedia. Electricity Made Easy. Build Your Own Country House.*’

She smiled. Camille knitted his brows, worried by a feeling

that something more than he could fathom underlay this last remark.

'Have you a wireless set?'

'We have a receiving set, but we never use it. It's in one of the sheds down by the river, I believe, and I expect the damp has finished it off.'

'Do you get any newspapers?'

'Once every six weeks, when the mail comes. My sister sends me our local paper after she's read it. So I'm kept posted in the marriages and deaths at Moulins.'

'This soup is really good. Did your black girl make it?'

'Yes.'

And it was also Baligi who shyly served a dish of boiled fish, with melted butter and potatoes.

'If you like mangoes, they're in season. And I can get you some alligator-pears. Do you know them?'

'I was brought up in India, I've lived in South America, Australia, and New Zealand. Ever been to New Zealand?'

'No.'

'That's where Phelps hails from.'

'I know.'

He said 'I know' so curtly that a silence followed, lasting several minutes, after which he spoke again:

'We'll have a visit from Major Crosby before the day is out.'

'Why do you think that?'

'Because "you" Captain Phelps will phone to him from Niangara. Crosby will call for him in his car and drive him here. He does a steady sixty miles an hour, whatever the state of the roads. And he never stops, unless he sees something to shoot at on the way.'

The heat was steadily rising, and the stillness of high noon brooded on the jungle. Not a leaf stirred, and the only sound was a distant murmur of voices, women talking in a village hidden in the bush.

Camille had eaten less than half of what he usually ate. All

were longing to have done with this dismal meal, but lacked the energy to make a move. Baligi could be seen leaning against the jamb of the kitchen door, waiting for the order to clear away.

'Do you take coffee after lunch?'

'It would prevent my sleeping, and I propose to have a siesta.'

She made a movement, as if wanting to rise. Graux hurried to her side.

'Camille, come and help.'

'I'm awfully sorry to give you so much trouble. I'll only ask you to carry me to my bed.'

As they were carrying her into the bedroom, the injured leg brushed against the door. In fact, Camille was so clumsy that Graux called him to order with an unwonted sharpness:

'Can't you look where you're going?'

At last she was deposited on the bed, and Camille backed out of the room. Graux hesitated. Lines of dazzling light showed between the slats of the venetian blinds.

'Couldn't you close them completely?' Lady Makinson asked fretfully. Graux had an impression that her nerves were strung up almost to breaking-point.

He took longer than was needed to get the slats in line; after that, the only light in the room was a mere glimmer filtering through tiny chinks. A big mason-bee was buzzing in the sultry gloom.

'Shall I kill it?' he asked.

His voice sounded so odd, his attitude was so quaintly woe-begone, that Lady Makinson gave a nervous laugh.

Unthinkingly Camille had closed the door behind him. From beyond it came a faint tinkle of crockery; Baligi was gathering the plates and glasses on the check table-cloth.

CHAPTER IV

February 26. There was a leopard roaming round the bungalow last night. The elephants were very nervous. Tom Thumb so much so that he wouldn't do a stroke of work to-day. Only three hundred pounds of salt left in store. A swarm of grasshoppers passed south of the plantation at 5 p.m. In the distance they looked like a thunder-cloud.

'February 27. The leopard came again. Camille is in one of his moods.'

Each night since his coming to Africa, Ferdinand Graux had thus recorded the principal happenings of the day. Every tenth day he sent the sheets to his mother in guise of a letter. To despatch it he had to travel twenty-five miles in his car, to the junction between his private road and the main road, where he had nailed a letter-box to a tree. It had two keys, one of which he kept himself; the other he had given to the driver of the bus, who carried the letter as far as Bodi. Thence Smith, the proprietor of the hotel, took it to the Airways terminus in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, to which he went regularly once a week.

The envelope usually contained ten or twelve sheets closely covered with writing. To begin with, Graux had used ordinary notepaper; then his mother, pointing out that the letter sometimes cost as much as fifteen francs in stamps, had supplied him with a box of airmail paper.

'Camille is in one of his moods.'

One day when at home he had tried to explain to his mother what this phrase – which recurred from time to time in his journal-letters – meant. For weeks on end Camille would be a model of docility, eager to forestall his employer's wishes and spare him every trouble. Then suddenly one morning he would

appear with a glum face, murmur a reluctant 'Good morning', and stare at Graux with almost hostile eyes.

'Absurd as it sounds, I think he's suffering from jealousy when he gets like that,' Graux had told his mother.

He and his mother had no secrets between them, and understood each other perfectly. Indeed, in the small household at Moulins, they formed a clan apart. Like her son, Madame Graux never set foot in the shop, and she had built up around her in the big, dimly-lit first-floor rooms an atmosphere of quietude and silence that strongly appealed to Ferdinand.

'But what on earth can he be jealous about?'

Just plain jealous, Graux explained, incredible as that might seem. It had begun with Maligbanga – a native girl now married and mother of several children, who, before her marriage, had been Graux's first housekeeper.

He had chosen her quite haphazard, for her looks were not above the average. Nevertheless, quite soon he discovered that Camille had taken a fancy to her. That he should have picked on Maligbanga when there were far prettier girls available in the surrounding villages had puzzled Graux at first. But when Maligbanga got married and was replaced by Baligi, Camille promptly transferred to her his vain devotion.

Obviously it was more than mere coincidence. The truth was that Camille was incapable of choosing for himself; and also, Graux suspected, he got a romantic thrill from nursing a secret grief.

For weeks on end he hardly thought of it. Then suddenly his passion would blaze up again, and his distress was unconcealed. It was to such emotional crises that Graux referred when now and again he wrote in his diary: '*Camille is in one of his moods.*'

These sheets he had just found in his blotter were ones he had written during the week preceding his departure for Europe. There would have been no point in posting them, as

he was due to arrive himself in France at the same time as the mail.

'February 28. Shot the leopard at last! To tempt him within range I tied a dog under the verandah. Tried to save the skin, but the natives were so excited by their enemy's death that they slashed it to pieces with their spears.

'The infirmary roof is leaking and needs repairs. While I am about it I think I shall put in a double roof.'

His letters to Emilienne were shorter. He had told her once for all that if she wanted 'more details' she had only to apply to his mother.

More recently he had written:

'There was a couple on the plane from Alexandria who made more noise than all the others put together. The man is a Belgian civil servant. He has been only three years in the Congo, but his liver is troubling him already. His wife - quite unintentionally, for she certainly means well - will lead him a dog's life, of which he had a foretaste on the way. In Africa one should be very careful whom one marries. Beside this couple, who drew everyone's attention to them, I must have seemed stolid as an Englishman!'

And on another sheet:

'May 18. I expect you saw in the papers that two English aviators, Lady Makinson and Captain Phelps, had disappeared with their plane in the course of a flight over the Congo. I have just found them here, in occupation of my bungalow! Lady Makinson, whose knee is injured, has taken over my bed. They seem to find this arrangement quite natural!

'May 19. You remember my telling you about the young couple on the plane, the Belgian civil servant and his exuberant little wife (who, by the way, rejoices in the name of "Yette" and hails from the Boulevard Beaumarchais, Paris - which "places" her, as some of our

snobbish friends at Moulins would say). She drank in every word I said and kept on turning to her husband with a:

“Do you hear, Georges?”

‘He always scowled at her when she said it, but one felt that he, like her, was labouring under a sense of inferiority, due to his social background.

‘Well, if Emilienne were here now, she might well take to saying to me at every moment:

“Do you see, Ferdinand?”

‘For between myself on the one hand and Lady Makinson and her young airman on the other there’s much the same social difference as that between the young Belgian couple and myself. It’s a question of upbringing really (no reproach intended!). They’re in my house and it’s I who feel like an intruder. And I’m always being reminded of the difference between us by absurd little details – like the glance she gave those napkin-cases Marie-Thérèse embroidered for me. I blushed as if I’d been caught in some outrageous social solecism!

‘Please don’t tell Marie-Thérèse; she wouldn’t understand.

‘They get on even Camille’s nerves. He spent ten years learning English, and when he speaks it our guests don’t understand a word.

‘Anyhow, I am hoping they will leave to-morrow. We are waiting for a message from Niangara.’

On the last sheet he had written:

‘Major Crosby, who runs the elephant farm, came to dine with us. They asked me if they might talk English at dinner. It seems I speak it without a trace of an accent. Lady Makinson will stay on till the new propeller she has ordered from England turns up. So that anyhow I can have a bedroom to sleep in, Phelps is moving to Major Crosby’s place, and Major Crosby is putting his car at his disposal. We are having a break in the rains, which had only just begun, and the temperature is mounting up.’

As he wrote these last lines, in the bedroom Phelps had vacated, his hands were shaking as if he had an attack of fever.

Hé had been in this state all the evening, so much so indeed that he had thought best to murmur something about malaria.

Major Crosby had turned up at five in his racing-car, which in its youth, fifteen years before, made everybody turn and stare at it in the streets of London. The whole body was of aluminium, it was shaped exactly like a torpedo, and the roar of its engine could be heard a mile away.

When it arrived, Graux was pacing the river-bank, trying to steady his nerves. He had had a distant glimpse of Crosby in the driver's seat with Phelps beside him and, instead of going back to the bungalow, had walked half a mile up-stream, idly gazing at the river to see if the friendly hippo was still in his old haunt.

He heard someone running up behind him and, looking round, saw Camille.

'The Major's here,' he panted. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Help Baligi to get dinner ready for the lot of them.'

'How about you?'

'I'll be back presently. Say I'm busy.'

But Camille was too stupid to realize that the best thing he could do was to leave Graux in peace. He was worried by the look on his employer's face – the look of a man who has been shedding tears or is on the brink of them – and his flushed cheeks.

'Feeling seedy?'

'Oh, go away, damn you!'

Never before had he spoken in that tone to Camille. But his nerves were out of hand; he'd go to almost any length just to be left in peace.

Yet, alone, he felt just as bad. Indeed, as Camille was going away he called him back.

'Camille! Have you seen her?'

'Who? Oh, Lady Makinson, you mean. Yes, I've just been helping Captain Phelps to carry her to the hall.'

‘What did she say?’

‘Nothing.’

‘How was she looking?’

‘Oh, the same as usual.’

‘Go now.’

He fell to wondering if he was feeling happy or depressed. Both at once, perhaps; but more depressed than happy. For though at this moment he was walking in familiar surroundings – surroundings which he, to a great extent, had personally created – he felt hopelessly estranged from them, as if some link had snapped between himself and his life’s work.

He tried again to see the hippopotamus. Yes, there it was, lazily floundering in the muddy water – but now the sight gave him no pleasure. How absurd he had been, idling away whole evenings watching a stupid hippopotamus and making believe they were becoming friends!

‘Old Potam!’ He recalled a remark Emilienne had made to him:

‘Do you know, I’m almost jealous of your “dear old Potam”. You talk of him so sentimentally.’

What craziness! To think that he, Ferdinand Graux, had let himself get into such a state! Yes, he must be really ill. Even the sight of the red roofs of his buildings in the distance filled him with disgust, a sort of nausea.

For he couldn’t think of anything but her – and of *that*. Yes, *that*! A woman who, after all, was only a woman; an embrace that was an embrace like any other woman’s. What sense was there in attributing so much importance to a mere incident, a momentary thrill? And in letting it play havoc with his peace of mind, fill him with thoughts for which he blushed – instead of taking it in his stride as any healthy-minded man would do?

There were moments when he actually imagined his whole life had been changed. No less than that! And changed by what? By an hour of blind passion, an ugly gesture.

He could have beaten his breast with rage against himself – but no, at all costs he must steady his nerves, must become once more the rational, level-headed man he used to be. And get things into perspective.

He had had an hour of 'love' with Lady Makinson. Well and good! Now – it was over and done with, all passion spent. How absurd it would be to suppose she attached any special importance to that act! For her it was an everyday event. Not only was she married, with two children, but she had Phelps in constant attendance. No, probably it meant nothing to her.

Abruptly he turned on his heel and started back towards the bungalow. He had regained, or so he thought, his peace of mind, and, as he strode quickly on, applied himself to thinking out the order to be given at Stanleyville for the repairs to the infirmary roof. Quite a lot of corrugated iron would be wanted, for one thing; there was practically none left in the godown ...

What was the sense of it? Was it any less absurd to be thinking about corrugated iron than about – her? Looking back, he wondered what had been the use of sweating his soul out for six years, building up an enterprise that didn't bring in a sou; that was, on the contrary, a drain on his resources, and quite unsaleable, as no one else would dream of settling in such a god-forsaken corner of the bush!

Most of all he was eager to find out if she too had changed. Just now, in his arms, she had shown a capacity for passion that amazed him. He had never conceived that a woman, especially a woman of her kind, could lose her self-control so utterly. At certain moments she had seemed like a little girl nestling to his breast, and he couldn't tell if she were whimpering or laughing. Now and again she had said some words, quite trivial words, but in a strange, far-away tone whose echoes haunted him still.

He took pains to walk at a steady pace, unhurrying, as he approached the bungalow, for he knew, they could see him

from the verandah. Crosby, a genial, hard-bitten, hard-drinking old Englishman, came down the path to greet him, and slapped him on the back.

'Hullo, Ferdinand, you old scoundrell! Had a good time on leave? You're a sly dog keeping charming ladies hidden away in your bungalow. I'd never have thought it of you!'

She was smiling to him! He saw her reclining in the sleeve-chair, a cigarette between her lips, her eyes half shut because of the smoke curling up in front of them. A smile like that of a hostess welcoming an expected guest; no more. Ferdinand shot a sour glance at the young man seated at her side, who called to him:

'Your assistant has invited us to dinner, and I hear we're to have a jellied duck you brought with you from France. Very sporting of you to let us have it!'

She said:

'Would you mind having a couple of eggs poached for me, Ferdinand? I never eat poultry.'

That 'Ferdinand' came as a surprise, but she had said it in such a natural tone that no one, not even Phelps, noticed it.

A moment later she was talking about the plane, after excusing herself for speaking in English.

'I hope you don't mind. But the major speaks French with such an atrocious accent.'

Phelps had brought a cable from her husband, which he read out aloud:

'Have been most anxious stop send news daily stop children well stop wire when returning stop love Ronald.'

She showed no emotion, but promptly started asking about the propeller. Phelps had to repeat word for word the cable he had sent to London; then give full details of the steps he had taken to get their passports in order.

Night was falling. The English members of the group had helped themselves to whisky; it was the major's third peg.

All eyes were turned towards the hillside, over which a pale blue mist was spreading, and the tall, tapering silk-cotton tree rising in lonely eminence above the undergrowth.

Now and again Lady Makinson turned to glance at Ferdinand, who tried in vain to find any special look in her eyes. She was just the same as usual, and didn't even seem tired!

'Do you hear, Ferdinand?'

- 'Sorry! I wasn't listening.'

'Up in the clouds, eh? ... I was just saying that we really can't let you sleep any longer on a camp-bed. Jimmy will go back with the major to-night.'

Why 'Jimmy', and not herself?

'If I'm not too much of a nuisance,' she continued, 'I'll stay on till my leg's a bit better. Jimmy can use your car to come and see me, can't he, Major Crosby?'

He was all at sea. If it was a device of hers for being alone with him, why not make him understand this by a special look or intonation?

Baligi was laying the table, Camille hovering in the background, too shy to join the group. Ferdinand called him and turned to Crosby.

'I don't think you've met Camille yet. He's my assistant, and a very old friend.'

'Does he speak English?'

'He understands it perfectly.'

The question hadn't much point, as the three visitors proceeded to talk amongst themselves, ignoring their hosts. The two men ate the jellied duck, prepared by Madame Graux with her own hands, as if it were a *plat du jour* on a restaurant menu. The major continued drinking whisky, and Ferdinand was surprised to see Lady Makinson following suit.

'Heard anything of the colonel?'

They talked of things that interested them, people Graux had never heard of, mostly Indian Army officers and members of the diplomatic service.

'Have Jimmy's people cut him off yet?' the major asked.

'No, they've given me another three months' grace,' grinned Phelps.

He was the heir-apparent, so to speak, of the famous House of Phelps, now in the hands of two strait-laced old brothers, one of whom had never married, while the other had only one son, the young man sitting at the table. He, however, flatly refused to have anything to do with commerce.

'Do they still pay your bills?'

'Some of them,' Lady Makinson replied, and Ferdinand felt vaguely annoyed that she should know so much about Phelps's private affairs. But then she added: 'I thought at first of registering my plane in his name as I hadn't yet qualified as a pilot. Then someone was kind enough to warn me that if I did so his creditors would promptly have it seized.'

She seemed to treat that as a joke, and so did Phelps.

Canille was making desperate attempts to catch the drift of the conversation

'Did you ever go back to Java?' the major asked. 'And have you heard anything more of that quaint little Dutchman who made us laugh so much?'

'He sends me a picture-postcard now and then.'

'One of your victims, wasn't he?'

Ferdinand reddened. It had struck him that there might well be points in common between the comic Dutchman and himself. But had the Dutchman ...? Then he heard Lady Makinson speaking to him.

'What's wrong? Feeling bored by all our talk?'

'No. I think I've a touch of malaria.'

'You'd better go to bed.'

So that was how she felt about him! She packed him off to bed so as the better to enjoy the company of these compatriots of hers, these people of her own social set, who probably regarded him as an outsider!

He could hardly believe that this was the same woman whom

he had held in his arms only a few hours before; who, under his caresses, had seemed to lose all her sophistication and to become a queer little whimpering girl, burying her moist eyes on her lover's breast.

'When are you going to look me up?' asked Major Crosby. 'I've an A1 cow to sell you, if you want her. She's a marvel! When she's ready for it I just turn her loose in the bush, and - last time she brought back with her two magnificent bulls who let themselves be shackled without giving us the least trouble. I can let you have her for fifty thousand francs. What about it?'

'I'll think it over.'

Crosby was in great form, discoursing with equal zest of big-game shooting, his financial *coups*, drinking-parties, and society scandals of the Edwardian era. With his snow-white hair and plump, rubicund cheeks, he was the typical sportsman of an older generation. He smoked cigars banded with his initials and wore riding-breeches of a discreetly original shade of brown, and impeccable cut.

Two or three times in the course of the evening his eyes strayed deliberately from Lady Makinson to Ferdinand, who drew the conclusion that the major had guessed...

'Well, well, I suppose we'd better make a move,' he said at last, glancing towards Phelps.

'Wait!' said Lady Makinson. 'Will you help me into my room, Phelps, before you go? I'm still a poor helpless cripple, don't forget!'

Ferdinand and Phelps carried her to the bed. As he was taking his leave Phelps bent over her hand and kissed it ceremoniously.

'Will you come to-morrow?' she asked.

'Of course, if the major'll lend me his bus. That all right, Graux?'

'Quite all right.'

'Good night. Pleasant dreams!'

'Good night.'

Feeling rather at a loss, Ferdinand began to move towards the door, muttering:

'Good night, Lady Makinson.'

'Good night, Ferdinand.'

It was preposterous, the way everything was happening, everybody behaving as if it were the close of a quite ordinary day. Before stepping into his car Crosby lit another cigar, while Phelps called cheerily:

'Bye-bye! See you to-morrow.'

In fact, it was just such a scene as may be witnessed any night at the front door of any country house in Europe after the break-up of a dinner-party. The roar of the engine died into the darkness. As Camille followed Ferdinand back into the hall he was scowling, and something prompted him to say:

'I can't stand the English!'

'Ssh!'

Quite unnecessary; the door was closed, she couldn't have heard.

'Are they going to stay here long?'

'I've no idea.'

Camille may have had an inkling of something – or else it was a feeler, for he had all the cunning of the French peasant in his blood; for he now remarked with a casual air, as if announcing a trivial domestic event:

'Baligi was crying all the afternoon.'

'Why?'

No answer. Camille, who was to continue sleeping in the hall, was bending over his camp-bed, straightening the pillow.

'Good night.'

'Good night.'

Graux hesitated for a while before entering the room where he was to sleep. It struck him he'd have done better to get Camille to sleep in one of the outbuildings, the infirmary for

instance, where there were no patients for the moment. For Camille's presence in the hall made it rather awkward going to Lady Makinson's room.

Nevertheless he walked boldly across the hall and knocked at her door. A voice asked:

'Who's there?'

His courage ebbed away, and he replied uncomfortably:

'I wanted to know if there's anything you require.'

'Thanks ... I don't need anything.'

That was why his hand was shaking as, in his room, he recorded his impressions of that uncomfortable luncheon party, and the 'social difference' between himself and his guests of which he had become so distastefully aware.

He had spent some time trying to set his thoughts in order, and finally had lit on no better explanation than this:

'May 20. I am still convinced that it isn't due to the difference of nationality, but to that of our respective milieus. I have no doubt that there are people like them in Paris too, in a certain set. Phelps drove in this morning by himself in Crosby's car and spent a couple of hours with Lady Makinson in her room. It makes me feel terribly bourgeois, but never for a moment can I get it out of my head that she's the mother of two children.'

Nothing in Lady Makinson's attitude that day had given the least hint that she had been Ferdinand's mistress on the previous afternoon. She was exactly as usual and, though her leg was giving her some pain, fairly cheerful. At dinner the night before, Major Crosby had suggested she should go to Stanleyville for treatment, pointing out that it was only a four days' journey in the car. She had turned down the suggestion, referring to her previous accidents, from all of which she had recovered.

'But suppose it leaves you with a limp?'

'Shall I limp, Ferdinand?'

'I don't think so.'

‘You see!’

The track was being cleared rapidly and the plane had already progressed three hundred yards. Ferdinand had told off Baligi for wearing a dirty dress. Camille was sulking again.

But this time was it on account of Baligi, or of the English-woman? Was he going to carry his mania to the point of falling in love with Lady Makinson?

Graux was very short with him throughout the day; so much so that on one occasion, when he had made a particularly unjustified remark, he felt called on to apologize.

‘Sorry! It’s this damned rain that keeps on holding off; don’t you find it gets on your nerves too?’

For after the rains had set in as usual there had been a sudden break; hardly a drop had fallen for a fortnight.

‘I wonder if Emilienne’s nerves will stand the climate we sometimes have here. One has the impression that the air one breathes is charged with electricity. Even the elephants feel it, and jib at everything one gives them to do. To-day I changed my shirt four times. I cannot understand how Lady Makinson seems so unaffected by the heat. Even on the verandah I have to keep my double-decker hat on because of the glare, whereas she sits there for hours, bareheaded.’

On this page there was a footnote:

‘Tell Emilienne to bring a good supply of quinine in cachets. The last lot I got is in tablets (I forgot to specify I wanted it in cachets), and it’s nothing like so effective.’

Somehow he couldn’t help adding:

‘Lady Makinson never takes quinine. To look at her you’d think her delicate, but actually she is tougher than most men.’

Phelps left at five. Graux, who had been roaming his plantation for two hours under the sun, was streaming with sweat, his face blazing red. On his return to the bungalow he found

Lady Makinson sitting in the hall; Camille, assisted by Baligi, had carried her there.

Affecting not to see her, he went to the bookcase and took from it a book on economics; then poured himself out a glass of water and drank it in little sips.

‘Ferdinand!’

He made as if he had not heard.

‘Listen, Ferdinand! If you don’t behave more sensibly I warn you I shall – have nothing more to do with you! I’ve been watching you for the last two hours. Go and change at once.’

His shirt was sopping wet. He had tramped about aimlessly under a blazing sun, pretending to be studying the condition of his coffee bushes.

‘Really one would almost think you were about ten years old, from the way you go on. No, don’t come near me. Get out of those wet clothes at once!’

And he obeyed her. That may have been why he had mentioned in his diary-letter the fact that he had changed his shirt four times.

When he returned she was reading the book on political economy, a cigarette between her lips.

‘Don’t talk, please ... This book is quite interesting.’

After some minutes’ silence his nerves were steadier, and when she looked up from her book, she gave him an approving glance.

‘Good. That’s how I like to see you. Yesterday evening, when you took off your glasses, you looked so forlorn, like a poor lost child.’

He did not remember having taken off his glasses, but it was quite true that when he did so his short-sighted eyes gave him a half-dazed appearance.

‘Sit down. Now don’t move.’

Was she about to yield to a gentler mood, her mood of that memorable afternoon? No, it was not to be. And after dinner she went to bed immediately.

'This evening, in the course of conversation, she gave me to understand that Phelps has been staying with them at Stamboul. Did she mean me to infer that her husband knows about their "affair"? Or does Makinson regard it merely as a flirtation?'

This letter would be read in one of the big sombre rooms, dappled with glints of burnished copper, to which Graux senior referred when saying to his son:

'Go up to your mother's place.'

Indeed, it was so much 'her place', that quiet realm of silence and subdued light above the gunsmith's shop, that after dinner Ferdinand's father usually went down to his office, where he felt more at ease, to read the evening paper.

His younger son, named Evariste after his father, and like him in character and appearance, was to take over the business when the old man retired. Madame Graux, to distinguish him from his brother, always said 'Your son'.

Whereas Ferdinand was his mother's son. He tried to picture her as she was at the age of thirty-two, Lady Makinson's age, and it set him wondering ...

'In the last analysis,' he wrote, 'morality is little more than a matter of class convention. Camille informed me the other day that girls in his village rarely marry until they have a baby, and everyone takes that as a matter of course.'

All the same, he added:

'Spent two hours inspecting the plantation under a very hot sun. If the rain doesn't hold off too long, we should have a bumper crop this year.'

Was she asleep? She had carried off to her room the book on economics, and, to his surprise, seemed genuinely to find it interesting.

There were moments when he thrust angrily aside the memory of what had passed between them, as if it were something almost repulsive. Yes, he was ashamed of that insensate

hour in the hot stuffy bedroom, of those meaningless words they had babbled, of certain clumsy gestures – the grossness of it all.

And yet, when he recalled, for instance, the tone in which she had uttered his name, he felt a sudden uprush of emotion and, clenching his fists, took a step towards her room ... But the hall, in which Camille was sleeping, intervened; and if he knocked, Camille would be sure to hear ...

Ferdinand found him still asleep there when he went out next morning, well before sunrise, for an inspection of the native huts.

When, towards ten, he returned, Camille was only just leaving the bungalow and Lady Makinson had settled down in the hall. It struck him that Camille avoided meeting his gaze. As he was coming up the steps a voice hailed him:

‘Good morning, Talatala!’

He stopped short. Lady Makinson was convulsed with laughter, but there was a hint of emotion, almost tenderness, in her eyes.

‘Good morning, Talatala,’ she repeated.

A glance told him what had happened. There was an empty chair beside the one in which she was reclining. Obviously she had asked Camille to sit beside her and they had been talking about him.

And Camille had confided to her the name the natives had for Ferdinand: *Mundele-na-Talatala*.

She was tickled by the idea of calling him by this name, little suspecting that Balıgı did the like when they were together.

‘Grumpy as ever? Now, come and sit beside me, Talatala, and do try to look amiable for a change.’

Talatala! It was absurd, but to hear her calling him by that name moved him so deeply that he had to look away. Evidently she noticed this, for she did not speak again for some moments, to give him time to recover his composure.

‘Now let’s have a talk, you and I. We have heaps of things

to tell each other, haven't we, and Phelps and Major Crosby will be here presently. Look at me, Monsieur Talatala ...'

CHAPTER V

TASSIN, the notary, was a small man of a quaintly lopsided build; that, anyhow, was one's first impression of him. On a nearer view one saw that this came from the fact that one of his cheeks was bigger than the other; it bulged as if he always had a quid of tobacco lodged in it.

Indeed, many people meeting him for the first time believed he really chewed tobacco, for he had a defect of speech that made him stammer and splutter like someone who is talking with his mouth full.

Like many undersized men, he had a habit of gesticulating, and, to make things worse, he suffered from a nervous *tic* that made him blink perpetually.

Beside him his daughter Emilienne looked a giantess. Not that she was heavily built, but she was unusually tall; and she had a very fine-grained skin, white as marble.

'No, Father,' she interrupted in a decided tone, 'it wasn't last year. It was two years ago ...'

He had lost his wife fifteen years before, and on her death his daughter had taken over the management of the household. A very competent young woman, she ruled him with a firm hand, as her mother had done before her. He took it in good part, for he had got used to being treated as a child – except by members of the Moulins Shooting Club, whose president he was, and by the bridge-players of the little town, who regarded him as an authority on the game.

Dinner was nearly ended in the big dining-room on the first floor above the gunsmith's shop. It was an evening in early June and the windows stood open on the tranquil light of

sunset, while the noises of the street provided a running accompaniment to the conversation.

Evariste Graux, Ferdinand's father, seated at the head of the table, wore an absent-minded look, and paid all the less attention to what was being said as he knew the voluble little lawyer needed no encouragement to go on talking.

Evariste Graux junior, who was twenty-three, was waiting impatiently for the meal to end so as to get away to a meeting of the Automobile Club of the *Département*.

His sister, Marie-Thérèse, soon to be a mother, was looking pale, and her husband, a fair young man, almost as jumpy in his manner as Tassin, was putting in a word now and then to show his interest in what the lawyer was saying.

The maid, who had been with the family for twenty-five years, moved soundlessly about the room. On the other side of the street, level with the window, a huge red umbrella in painted tin projected from the wall: a shop-sign that had been there since time immemorial.

Indeed, there was a curious timelessness about the scene; one had a feeling that these people could remain exactly as they were now, keeping the same attitudes and expressions, for ever, like a museum piece.

But just then Madame Graux made an almost imperceptible gesture, and the spell was broken; everybody rose. The men, instead of going to the drawing-room, moved to the window and halted in front of it.

Madame Graux said to her daughter:

'You're looking tired. How about lying down for a bit?'

Marie-Thérèse looked enquiringly at her husband, who observed:

'I'm not in favour of her taking too much rest in her present state.'

Emilienne was standing in the background. She had had her eyes fixed on her hostess for some minutes, and she knew that Madame Graux was aware of this, and understood.

‘Will you come with me for a moment, Emilienne?’

No one showed any surprise. Emilienne followed Ferdinand’s mother into the linen-room, where a sewing-machine, with lengths of material scattered round it, stood on a big deal table.

‘Show me the letter, please.’

Madame Graux put on her glasses and switched on the light, for the linen-room, which gave on an inner courtyard, was getting dark.

Emilienne said nothing, but the tense look on her face and the unwonted stiffness of her poise conveyed her thoughts as plainly as words. ‘You’ll see, the situation’s serious. We must put our heads together, you and I.’

Though not so tall as Emilienne, Madame Graux had all her natural dignity; with her amply moulded bust and close-fitting black dress she looked the typical matron of old family portraits.

‘Have you spoken about it to your father?’ she asked.

‘No, not yet.’

Madame Graux fell to reading the letter, her lips moving like those of a worshipper at Mass.

‘My dear Emilienne, - This is my fourth attempt at writing a letter to you. It must go now, such as it is, as the bus passes this morning. But really I hardly dare to write to you in my present state. I might so easily say some foolish thing, something I should regret bitterly all my life long.

‘I can only tell you that I am passing through a terrible emotional crisis and ask you to bear with me till you get my next letter. Meanwhile, rest assured that I am doing my utmost to prevent anything being changed between us.

‘Go and see mother; she will give you sound advice, I know. I am feeling run down mentally and physically. And the rains are still holding off!

‘With love, Ferdinand’

Madame Graux sighed, and refrained from looking at Emilienne, who murmured:

‘Well?’

‘I’d better show you the letter I’ve just had from him. The very first line told me ... something was amiss.’ She opened the linen-cupboard, in which she kept Ferdinand’s journal-letters. ‘You’d better read this. There’s nothing in it you shouldn’t see. I’ll be back in a few minutes. I must go and see to the coffee and liqueurs.’

‘I expect you saw in the papers that two English aviators, Lady Makinson and Captain Phelps, had disappeared with their plane ...’

Emilienne remained standing; she was not made for arm-chairs and easy attitudes.

‘For between myself on the one hand and Lady Makinson and her young airman on the other there’s much the same social difference as that between the young Belgian couple and myself ...’ And farther on: *‘I am hoping they will leave to-morrow.’* Only to be gainsaid in the next entry: *‘Lady Makinson will stay on till the propeller she has ordered from England turns up.’*

‘Emilienne,’ said Madame Graux, who had just returned, ‘your father wants to know if you’ll come back with him now; he wants to go to the club for a game of bridge.’

‘Ask him to wait a moment, please. I may have something to tell him.’

She finished reading the last sheet:

‘There are moments when I wonder if I am not on the brink of a drastic change in my life. And the intense heat, the storm that goes on brooding and never breaks, plays havoc with one’s nerves. Even Lady Makinson sometimes seems affected by it. In any case, it would be wiser for Emilienne to put back her departure for a few weeks.’

‘He says, will you come at once, as all the bridge-tables will have been made up in half an hour’s time.’

Emilienne did not trouble to answer; graver issues were at stake than missing a rubber of bridge. Still holding the sheets of airmail paper, she asked:

‘What do you make of it?’

‘And you?’

Emilienne’s eyes were dry, but her lips were paler than usual, and she never put any colour on them. Madame Graux had a sudden feeling of respect for this tall, stately girl, outwardly so self-possessed, who betrayed her emotion only by a slight movement of the throat, as if she were swallowing hard.

‘I suppose I’d better go,’ she said at last. But she did not mean ‘go home’ so as to enable her father to get his bridge. It was Ferdinand she had in mind, and the advisability of setting out for Africa at once. Madame Graux evidently agreed with her, for she raised no objection, but stared at the floor, deep in thought. After a while she said:

‘You must decide that for yourself, my dear.’

‘I know ... But can you explain it? It’s so unlike Ferdinand to behave like that. Really I’m almost frightened. Aren’t you?’

But Madame Graux preferred not to answer.

‘If I catch the plane at Brindisi, I can be there in a week.’

Both of them, perhaps, felt the same anxiety, but it was Madame Graux who voiced it, rather hesitantly.

‘Don’t you think it ... it might annoy him?’

Emilienne’s only reply was a slight shrug of her shoulders that seemed to say: ‘I’ll have to risk it. There’s too much at stake for me to trouble about Ferdinand’s *amour propre*.’

‘Will you tell your father what you’ve decided?’

‘Yes.’

‘How will you put it?’

Again her shoulders lifted slightly. Had it any great importance how she broke it to him? Before leaving the linen-room Emilienne kissed Madame Graux and asked, pointing to the sheets of paper:

‘May I take them?’

‘Certainly, my dear.’

Slipping them into her bodice, she entered the drawing-room. Marie-Thérèse and her husband were just making a move. Tassin, who was standing at the window smoking a cigar and talking to Evariste Graux, beamed with delight when his daughter appeared.

‘Ah, here you are at last! I thought you were never coming. With luck I’ll be in time for a game ... But what’s wrong, Emilienne?’

As she drew near the window the pale evening light brought out the waniness of her face, its tense immobility.

‘There’s nothing wrong with me. But I’ve something to tell you. I am leaving by the train to-morrow evening for Brindisi.’

‘What’s that you say? Leaving for Brindisi?’

Marie-Thérèse and her husband came back from the passage to hear the rest of it.

‘Yes, I must go to Ferdinand at once. He’s not very well, and it’s better I should be with him.’

From the expression on the face of Madame Graux, the lawyer gathered that she approved of the plan.

‘Is Ferdinand really ill?’ asked Graux.

‘Well, it’s just as if he was,’ his wife replied vaguely. ‘Anyhow, Emilienne is doing the right thing. I’m convinced of that.’

‘But what about me?’ wailed the little lawyer. One could see he was appalled at the thought of having to do without his daughter. ‘Really it was most inconsiderate of you to spring it on to me like that!’ He looked as if he might burst into tears at any moment. ‘Yes, most inconsiderate,’ he repeated. ‘And when will you be coming back?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

Madame Graux took compassion on the little man.

‘Let me give you a glass of brandy,’ she suggested.

With the approach of night a hush had fallen on the town; the sound of footfalls in the street had ceased, the red umbrella

on the opposite wall glowed a darker red and the cobbles in the street showed ashen-grey. A few minutes more and it would be time to close the window and turn on the lights.

And now abruptly all this evening peace had been shattered!

Marie-Thérèse and her husband lingered on, as if anxious to bear their part in the misfortune that had befallen the two families.

‘Will you take the plane?’

‘Yes, at Brindisi. I have a time-table at home.’

Only Evariste junior, who was now confabulating at the Automobile Club, knew nothing. His father betrayed his emotion only by loud, wheezy sighs and pulling a long face. At last he put in a word:

‘In any case, of course, you’d have been leaving in two months’ time.’ He said it mainly to console his old friend, the notary.

A moment later drops began to patter on the window-sill. A brisk, warm summer shower had just set in, and all the windows in the street closed simultaneously.

‘I want you to tell me something.’

Lady Makinson made a faint movement of impatience. Here, too, night had fallen. The two long chairs were side by side on the verandah where the lights had been switched off because of the insects.

Flooded with moonlight, the sky seemed infinitely remote, and the big stationary clouds with jagged edges looked like island-continents set in a blue, translucent ocean. The hillside facing the verandah was swathed in mist and nothing could be seen but the tall, tapering form of the silk-cotton tree, leafless now. Now and again they heard the distant thudding of a tom-tom, and the blue darkness was full of furtive sounds; natives padding bare-footed along the bush-paths, the rustle of wild animals creeping through the scrub.

'What do you want to know?'

'I want to know just how much you've told Phelps.'

She sighed. The question seemed to her so futile.

'He knows everything, doesn't he?'

'What do you mean by "everything"?'

'That you're my mistress.'

At that she nearly lost her temper, and there was more than impatience in her voice when she replied:

'But I'm not your mistress. And it's a beastly word to use. I'm free, and so are you.'

But that he wouldn't admit, would never admit!

'No!' he cried, impulsively. 'That's not true!'

'Ferdinand, do please be sensible. I shouldn't have stayed so long, I know ...'

'I'm positive you've told Phelps ... everything.'

But she thought best to keep silence. Lost in thoughts, they gazed up at the dark cloud masses rimmed with silvery light.

During the last ten days, anyhow, there had been nothing to prevent Lady Makinson from making a move and going to stay at the elephant farm, with Phelps and the major. Almost every evening she had said she would leave next day, and several times had even done her packing - only to announce with a slight yawn at the last moment:

'No. I don't feel like moving to day. Come for me with the car to-morrow, Jimmy, and I'll go back with you.'

One of the things that puzzled Ferdinand most was that Phelps should show no jealousy whatever. He shook Ferdinand's hand as usual, with a conventional, slightly distant cordiality; and the major, too, behaved as if he knew nothing.

But surely that was incredible. There was no plausible reason why Lady Makinson should be staying on in the bungalow. The latest news from London was that the propeller would take at least a month to reach her; indeed, there were times when she spoke of leaving her plane where it was for the time being and returning to Ankara by Imperial Airways.

‘What have you told him?’

For not only did Phelps show no jealousy, but, to Ferdinand’s surprise, his attitude now was much more friendly than at first. He had begun by almost ignoring Ferdinand’s existence. Now he actually made advances and sometimes spoke of Lady Makinson as if there were a tacit understanding between the three of them. Thus, on one occasion, he said to Ferdinand:

‘I’ve really a very great admiration for her husband. He is quite twenty years older than she, but he’s one of the best – genial, broad-minded – and everybody likes him.’

Ferdinand wondered what the young man was driving at, with this laudation of the husband. Was he hinting that Sir Ronald knew of his wife’s amours and tolerated them? Or was Phelps completely callous in such matters?

Another thing he confided to Ferdinand was that for two years he had been trying to cure Lady Makinson of the opium habit.

‘If she asks you for opium – we had some in the plane, you know – don’t get it for her. She’s slowing down a bit, I’m glad to say, but a year ago I’ve seen her smoke as many as thirty five pipes in a day. Luckily she has a splendid constitution.’

Another morning he remarked with an air of seeming casualness:

‘This is the first time I’ve known her stay so long at one place. It’s quite unlike her. You remember that when we fetched up here our passports hadn’t the proper visas. The reason’s quite simple; the plane was delivered on a Wednesday. Well, Lady Mary wouldn’t even wait till the Friday. She insisted on our taking off the very next day.’

Ferdinand, too, had got into the way of speaking of her, and addressing her, as ‘Lady Mary’.

‘Even when she was in her ’teens she was always doing unconventional things. Her father doted on her and let her have her way in everything. I hadn’t met her then, but it’s common

knowledge in her set in England. She'd leave for the Rocky Mountains at a few hours' notice as other people go for a week-end at Brighton. When she was eighteen she used to stroll up Regent Street with a panther cub in tow.'

Quite so; but why tell this to him, of all people? And why this uninvited frankness, behind which lurked undoubtedly a certain irony, and this complete lack of jealousy? Indeed, the young man's attitude seemed often to convey to him as clearly as words: 'I'm leaving you a clear field. Make the most of it!'

On two occasions it had happened, and they were the crucial moments of the last few weeks - indeed, of Ferdinand's whole life.

Why on those particular days rather than on others? The first occasion had been at breakfast, when they were seated round that chequered table-cloth which formerly he had taken for granted. Camille, who was in one of his moods, had wolfed his meal and left abruptly. In the morning light a spacious, comforting tranquillity brooded on the hillside, where the lush green foliage of the coffee bushes showed in sharp relief against the vividly red soil, dotted here and there with the dark forms of Negroes. Absent-mindedly Lady Makinson had reached towards her cigarette-case, then drawn her hand back, murmuring:

'No!'

He looked at her wonderingly, then asked:

'What are you thinking about?'

'Nothing ... Don't talk, please.'

He could see that she was deeply moved. And he could have sworn that she was yielding to the restful influence of her surroundings; perhaps to his personal influence as well, his sense of oneness with all that was most stable and serene in life and nature.

And then he had spoilt everything! For it was true, as she had often told him; he never knew when to hold his tongue!

'Do tell me what you're thinking about. Are you feeling sad? Mary! Look at me!'

And she had looked at him, but almost angrily. The spell was broken. She sighed:

'Oh, why *must* you always speak?'

'Because I love you.'

He had struck the wrong note again! Her only comment was an impatient shrug, which rankled in his memory throughout the day.

The second occasion had been on the second day when she was able to walk about a little. At night when he was writing in his room the door had opened. Lady Makinson stood in the doorway, leaning on her stick.

'I was wondering what you were up to, all by yourself.'

He had risen to his feet. From where she stood she gazed at the sheets of airmail paper on the table.

'You can read them,' he said.

And that night she had kissed him in a different way, without a trace of sensuality; then frowned, as if trying to dispel a haunting thought.

'You queer old Talatala!' she said in a low tone. 'No. Let me go to bed. Stay here.'

In the vast and hospitable silence of the night they gazed at one another, each conscious of a quickening of the heart. Why, once again, had he blundered into speech?

'There are moments when I really think you love me. But no sooner have you left my arms than ...'

'Ferdinand!'

'You see! It's as if you were ashamed, as if ...'

She flared up.

'Won't you ever learn to hold your tongue? Don't you realize there are things a man who has any ... any *savoir-vivre* doesn't speak about?'

'A man like Phelps, you mean?'

'Phelps, anyhow, knows when to keep his mouth shut.'

'Yes, Phelps is a well-bred English gentleman, whereas I ...'

'You always let your nerves get the better of you ... Oh, why must you spoil our last evening together? I'm leaving to-morrow.'

'Yes?'

'And I want you to promise me to behave sensibly, and take up your life as it was before I came. Yes, I assure you, that's the only thing to do. It's no use being romantic, my poor Talatala. I shall go back to Stamboul. I'll give tea-fights at the Embassy, play tennis, go yachting on the Bosphorus – and now and then, perhaps, I'll send you a picture postcard.'

There was an unwonted shrillness in her voice. He tried, without success, to make out the expression on her face.

'And Phelps will resume his post of gentleman-in-waiting,' he said bitterly.

'You're either sillier than I thought you, Ferdinand – or just spiteful. I'm handing over the plane to Phelps, who's quite determined to fly it to his country, New Zealand. It takes some pluck, you know, he has to cross the Indian Ocean and, after Madagascar, there are only two small islands on the way.'

'Why must you talk about *him*?'

'I thought it was you who started it.'

'Are we going to have another quarrel?'

He clenched his fists, disgusted with himself, with the incapacity of human minds to rise above the petty and the mean. Here he was, airing his futile grievances, when all the time his one desire was to take her in his arms, to implore her to stay with him always, to link her life with his ...!

'Mary!'

'Yes, Ferdinand? I'm here. But you go on talking all the time. I really think you enjoy tormenting yourself! You never seem to want to know anything about me, my life at Ankara, my children ...'

With an effort he kept silent, though words like those she

had just spoken made him feel desperate; it passed his comprehension how she could say such things.

'When I met you for the first time,' she went on, 'you gave the impression of being a staid, level-headed sort of man. Beside you Phelps cut the figure of a schoolboy. But when you took off those glasses you became just like him. No, not like him; like a nervous, temperamental youngster ... I ought to have left the first day I was fit to be moved.'

'Will you consent to answer just one question?'

'All right,' she sighed, to have done with it.

'Tell me this: does Phelps know, or doesn't he ...?'

'Know what?'

'That ... that I'm your lover.'

'Oh, couldn't you have let that subject drop! Yes, Ferdinand, he knows.'

'And he's not jealous?'

'Why should he be?'

'What? Do you mean to deny that he, too, is your lover?'

She stood up abruptly and tottered, as she'd forgotten to lean upon her stick.

'Where are you going?'

'To bed.'

'You haven't answered me yet.'

But already she was walking through the doorway, her footsteps echoed by the tapping of her stick on the tiled floor.

Why precisely at this moment did he seem to hear a coarse voice shrilling in his ear:

'Do you hear, Georges?'

Yes, and how aptly someone might have said to him just now: 'Do you see, Ferdinand?'

For the first time she locked her door; unreasonably enough, for he had never tried to enter her room without her permission.

With an effort, he too rose. As he stepped out into the hall

he had an impression of something abnormal, and switched on the light.

Camille was not there, and the blanket on his camp-bed had not been drawn back.

Greatly surprised, he went out to the verandah and started to walk round the bungalow, making as little noise as he could. On very hot nights Baligi sometimes brought her mat outside and slept in the open, near the kitchen door.

To-night, as it so chanced, it was on that side of the building that the moonlight fell. As Ferdinand was rounding the corner something stirred on the ground before him, a head and shoulders came into view.

It was Camille, who had been sleeping under the same blanket as the Negro girl and was obviously flustered at being caught in this position. Before he had time to rise to his feet Ferdinand moved away. On entering his bedroom he, too, locked the door.

Next morning Lady Makinson did not appear till ten o'clock, but he heard her moving about in her room. At ten precisely a car hooted at the entrance of the compound, and some moments later Major Crosby and Phelps came up the steps.

'Good morning, Graux. Isn't Lady Makinson up yet?'

She had heard them coming, and her door opened.

'Come in for a moment, I've something to tell you,' she said; then, turning to Ferdinand, 'You don't mind, do you?'

The conversation in the bedroom lasted for a quarter of an hour. Twice Camille tried to buttonhole Ferdinand, and the second time got as far as to begin:

'I owe you an explanation ...'

'That's all right, old chap. Don't bother.'

As for Baligi, she had not put in an appearance yet. The rain still held off, though the sky was black with cloud and the earth scorching underfoot. There was hardly any water in the river, not enough to move the turbines.

At last the bedroom door opened.

'Any chance of a whisky?' asked the major, the moment he was outside the door. Lady Makinson, who was close behind him, said:

'Can you come for a moment, Ferdinand?'

He had never seen her before in this costume, a white tailor-made, which made her look quite different. It would have been more in place on a Riviera beach or the promenade-deck of a transatlantic liner than here, in the heart of the Congo jungle. Also, Ferdinand noticed, she was holding a pair of white gloves. She said to him in an even tone, though her eyes were moving restlessly from point to point:

'I'm dreadfully sorry to leave you like this, Ferdinand, but it has to be done. Now you must promise me to be sensible. Your fiancée will be coming out quite soon. And in five or six days I'll be back at home with my children.' They were alone, but he remained standing some distance from her, beside the door.

'I won't thank you,' she continued, 'for your hospitality; it might sound ironical. But I'm sure that some day we shall meet again, and I hope that when that happens we shall become great friends.'

He said nothing. She still avoided meeting his eyes.

'Did you hear what I said, Ferdinand?'

Without thinking, she had begun putting on a glove. Then she picked up from the table, and replaced, a book on coffee-growing that she had been reading, and said with a smile:

'From now on, every time I drink coffee I shall think of your hillside and the waterfall, and that quaint silk-cotton tree, and the elephants ... *Au revoir*, Ferdinand.'

She held out her hand with a frank, clean-cut gesture. Her aspect, too, in the white tailor-made costume, which brought out the slim lines of her figure, was clean-cut, almost statuesque.

'*Au revoir*, Talatala.'

He bent forward to kiss her hand, but she withdrew it just in time, and opened the door.

‘Well, are you ready?’

Phelps and the major hastily finished off their drinks.

‘We shall spend the night at Juba, I expect,’ the major said to Ferdinand. ‘That way we can see Lady Makinson off in the plane. We’ll call back here to-morrow. May we invite ourselves to lunch?’

She was crossing the verandah. Walking down the steps. Then she paused and seemed to be looking around for something. Finally she discovered Baligi peeping at her round the trunk of a banana tree, went up to her and, opening her bag, produced a five-pound note.

The engine was turning over. The crocodile-skin dressing-case had been placed on the seat beside the major, who insisted on another whisky before starting

‘Where’s Ferdinand?’

He took a step forward on the verandah. Phelps shut the door of the car, waved his hand, and the major slammed the gear home.

He heard, or seemed to hear, her voice: ‘Talatala!’

Then he swung round abruptly, there had been a curious noise, like a sob, behind him. He saw Camille, looking the picture of misery.

‘What are you doing there?’

‘Nothing. I ...’

They could hear the drone of the car, out of sight now, behind the elephant grass. It had passed the native village and there was a sudden squeal of brakes as Crosby slowed down at a point where the road had caved in.

Graux sat down on the edge of the table and stared at Camille, frowning.

‘If I’d known ...’ Camille paused uncomfortably.

‘Known what?’

‘I assure you I thought ...’

'Don't be a damned fool!' Graux had realized that Camille was still worrying over his lapse with Baligi.

'How much petrol is there in the car?'

'A hundred litres. Are you taking it out?'

'May do ... Now leave me alone, please. Wait! Get the car out of the shed in case I need it. Then go and see to the elephants.'

When he had brought the car in front of the bungalow, Camille seemed unable to tear himself away. From the window of his bedroom Ferdinand shouted:

'Didn't you hear what I told you?'

'Are you going to Niangara?'

'That's it. I'm going to Niangara – perhaps ...'

The window closed, and looking round, Camille saw Baligi crouching against the wall. She too was watching the car. In her hand was a five-pound note, but she seemed unaware of what she held and was rolling it into a ball, like a pocket-handkerchief.

CHAPTER VI

SMITH, the hotel-keeper, who was as weather-wise as any peasant, had warned Major Crosby when the car was on its way through Bodi:

'Take my tip and start back at once. Unless I'm much mistaken we're in for some heavy rain, and likely as not the road to your place will be flooded once it starts.'

Smith, a Belgian despite his name, had settled in these parts long before there were any air-routes, or even roads. When one went home in those adventurous days one had to travel by jungle-paths, on foot or in a machila – a hammock slung on a bamboo pole – to Stanleyville, then in a stern-wheeler down the Congo River, and the journey to Antwerp took altogether

three months or more. The alternative route *via* the Sudan and Egypt was still longer – and hotter.

Crosby and Phelps had stayed the night at Juba, so as to see Lady Makinson off next morning on the air-liner. Then they had made the mistake of having a too copious lunch, started late and reached the frontier after dark. By this time rain was coming down in torrents.

‘You see I was right,’ Smith chuckled as he met them at the hotel entrance. ‘I’ll bet you anything you like the road’s under water at the Leopard’s Leap. Anyhow, driving by night would be a mug’s game in weather like this.’

‘Let’s have a spot of whisky to start with,’ said Crosby.

Smith’s hotel was very different from those of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The first thing one noticed was a spacious park, all the more pleasing to the eye as the brick-red soil showed up the dark green of the foliage to advantage. The main building, a bungalow set in a luxuriance of tropical flowers, contained only a big dining-room, a lounge, and the kitchen. Dotted about the grounds were detached huts, which contained the bedrooms.

A homely, easy-going place and run on typically Belgian lines, Smith’s hotel was very different from the expertly managed, scrupulously clean hotels on the other side of the frontier, in British territory.

White-clad boys greeted the arriving guest with amiable smiles, and Smith, too, treated him less as a customer than as a friend, joined in every conversation, and was always ready with helpful advice on every subject under the African sun.

‘You’ll have roast guinea-fowl for dinner,’ he said to Major Crosby. ‘I bagged four this afternoon; they crossed the road just under my nose, the silly fools!’ •

Whether he was in his bungalow or on safari, under a blazing sun or in a tropical downpour, Major Crosby, with his pink cheeks and well-brushed, snow-white hair, his

well-groomed clothes and carefully knotted silk tie, always looked the picture of health and spruceness. One of his theories was that a man who has any respect for his appearance polishes his boots himself; and his had always a dazzling shine.

Was he listening to Smith? So it might seem, for he was looking at him. But one also had the impression that his thoughts were far away and he was wishing the Belgian would leave him to them.

'By the by,' said Smith, leaning across the table, 'did our friend get there in time? He was in the devil of a hurry and you could see his nerves were all to pieces. He filled his tank without saying a word, and started off at once for Juba. "Taking the plane?" I shouted after him. I couldn't quite catch what he said, but it sounded like, "Don't know".'

'He caught it,' said Phelps as he squirted some soda-water into his whisky.

'Has he had bad news from home?'

Crosby deliberately looked away, but showed no other sign of annoyance. And probably he would have had to put up with Smith's loquacity for some time longer, had not the entrance door been flung open just at that moment, and all eyes turned towards it. Drawn up under the portico was a small car, its pin-point headlights blinking in the wet darkness. It was a strange and marvellous contraption, more fit for a museum than the roads of Africa, with a high-pitched hood that gave it something of the look of a hansom-cab.

'Hullo, Smith!'

'Hullo, Macassis! Where have you blown in from?'

A boy promptly stepped forward, beaming all over his face, and after a brief parley jumped into the driver's seat and took the car to the garage.

Major Crosby uncrossed his legs and swung himself half round in his chair so as not to face the newcomer. And not to seem to be listening to what the two men said – they were speaking in the native language – he turned to Phelps and

remarked, as though summing up his meditations on the day's events:

'Really, Ferdinand wasn't playin' the game.'

Graux had charged across the landing-ground and scrambled into the plane less than a minute before it started; he had taken the precaution of buying his ticket in advance at the Airways office. His face was pale and drawn, but there was a look of defiance in his eyes, as if he were telling the world at large:

'Well, I've come, you see – and nothing will prevent my leaving.'

Lady Makinson, who was already seated in the cabin, feigned not to see him ...

Phelps had been observing the newcomer with some interest. He turned to Crosby and asked in a low tone:

'Who is it?'

Crosby put a finger to his lips, showing that he preferred not to explain for the moment. Meanwhile Macassis and Smith were talking away. Each seemed delighted to see the other, and Smith had taken a napkin from the nickel-plated globe mounted on a standard in which the napkins were kept, and was rubbing down the other man's wet back with it.

For Macassis had nothing whatever on but a pair of shorts. His body was as lean and sinewy as an Arab's, and tanned a rich brown all over. The long, narrow head was crowned by a shock of steel-grey hair.

His real name was as English as the hotel proprietor's, and he was, in fact, an Englishman, but everyone from the Uele to Kenya called him by his native nickname, 'Macassis', meaning more or less 'The Tough'.

He had been living in these parts for forty years, and he had recognized Crosby at once. By profession Macassis was an engineer. It was he who had discovered the Watsa gold-mine, and he still had a large interest in it.

'No,' said Crosby as he helped himself to another peg,

'it wasn't playin' the game. Not the act of a gentleman, what?'

Macassis, too, wasn't a gentleman by the major's standards, which was why the two men were not on speaking terms. He had a wife in London, whom he kept well supplied with money, but his taste in women ran to local colour, and nothing would induce him to leave Africa. In almost every village he had a girl or two, and he made no secret of it, often taking them out for drives in his comical little car.

For Crosby he had committed the unforgivable sin; he had 'gone native'.

Turning to Phelps and Crosby, Smith announced:

'Yes, gentlemen, I was quite right. The road's under water at the place I told you. Macassis has just come from there; he had water up to his axles and only just got through.'

Macassis had settled into a wicker chair and was drinking water. The air in the room was hot and steamy, but traversed by occasional wafts of coolness. They could hear the purr of the engine which supplied the electric light. The native boys were squatting in the background, as they had nothing to do for the moment.

'You didn't answer me just now, Major. Shall I roast a guinea-fowl for your dinner?'

'No,' said Crosby promptly. 'I'll have ham and eggs, and some beer.' He was aware that the kitchen, in which Smith himself did the cooking, was far from being a model of cleanliness.

No one spoke for ten minutes, and what with the heat of the room and the steady drumming of the rain, everybody was becoming drowsy, when the sound of a motor-engine – not that of the power-plant – made the hotel-keeper prick up his ears. It ~~was~~ so unexpected, that before going to the door he peered through the dingy net-curtain. The rain was glittering down before two powerful headlights. He hurried to the door.

'Come in, madame,' he said, standing aside for the young woman in a waterproof who came hurrying up the steps.

The waterproof was streaming with water. The rain had forced its way through the hood of the car. As she slipped off her coat she looked around her.

'Is it true we can't get any farther to-night?' she asked after a moment.

A half-caste in a red-and-green sweater had come in behind her and closed the door.

'I told her that with all this rain we'd have to stop the night here,' he explained. 'That all right, Smith?'

This man, too, was a familiar figure in these parts. He owned an old car in which he taxied passengers from the Juba landing-ground to their destinations.

'Have you far to go?' Smith asked the girl.

'To the coffee plantation owned by Monsieur Graux. Some hundred and fifty miles, judging by the map.'

'You can't get through. The road's under water.'

'Oh!'

'What's more, Ferdinand has just left for Europe.'

Everyone, Phelps especially, was casting furtive glances at the girl standing by the door. They could see her turn quite pale and look round for somewhere to sit down. It was Phelps who came to the rescue, carrying the chair in which he had been sitting.

She conjured up a smile of thanks, then asked in a tone as casual as she could make it:

'Are you sure? Did he tell you that?'

'He went through yesterday with his car,' Smith replied, 'on his way to Juba. These gentlemen know him – they've been staying at his place – and they saw him catch the Airways plane.'

She looked towards Phelps, who nodded.

Emilienne was wearing a very plain grey dress, which had nothing tropical about it, yet looked quite in keeping with her

present surroundings. The driver, who kept close beside her, as if she were under his protection, said:

'In any case you'll have to stay here for the night. I've ordered a roast guinea-fowl. I assure you it will be quite all right; Smith is an old friend of mine. To-morrow - by the way, do you still intend to go to the plantation?'

'Yes, I think I'll go there all the same. Anyhow, I'll let you know definitely to-morrow morning.'

Quite unexpectedly, Macassis, who had been hovering in the background, put in a word:

'You're his fiancée, aren't you?'

'Yes. How did you know about it?' She looked with surprise at this half-naked brown man who seemed to know so much.

'Oh, I called in at the plantation this morning and I had a talk with Camille ... Do you know anything about that letter he was expecting from Brussels?'

'A bit.'

If only there were no more urgent problem than that letter from Brussels! She guessed its contents, and she knew that Ferdinand had been awaiting it anxiously since his return to Africa. It would inform him whether he was to be granted a permanent title to the plantation which he now occupied under a lease taken over from a Belgian six years previously. One of the main objects of his recent trip to Europe had been to get in touch with the Belgian Colonial Office about the matter, and they had promised to give him a reply within a few weeks.

'The letter came in,' Macassis continued, 'on the day he left, and the authorities at Niangara want to see him about it as soon as possible. Camille doesn't dare to take any steps on his own authority.'

'But if the road's under water ...' she began, with another glance towards Phelps. He had roused her interest, for she had an inkling he was Lady Makinson's pilot and companion.

‘The road’s under water,’ said Macassis, ‘but you’ll be able to get through by to-morrow morning ... Hi there, Smith!’

Smith came from the kitchen, where the guinea-fowl was browning in the oven.

‘Can you send someone with a message to Maliro?’

Smith called up one of the boys, who rather sulkily began to take off his white coat.

‘You drive him there,’ said Macassis to the half-caste. ‘It’s the third village up the road. Maliro will put a couple of hundred men on the job and they’ll have run a temporary dam up by the morning. Tell him it’s very urgent and he must keep his men at it all night.’

He repeated this to the Negro till the man had got the message pat. When the car had driven away, Macassis, still standing where he was beside the door, called across to Emilienne:

‘How much did he make you pay?’

‘The driver? Three thousand francs.’

‘Sheer robbery! A thousand would have been enough. Do you know how to drive? Yes? In that case, the best thing you can do is to buy his bus outright. You’ll need it for going to Niangara. I can get it for you for six thousand francs. When you’ve done with it you’ll sell it easily enough for five thousand.’

Crosby was staring at his whisky, so absorbed in contemplation of it that one might have thought he didn’t hear a word of all this.

‘Thanks,’ said Emilienne. ‘It’s very kind of you.’ But there was a shade of hesitation in her voice. Who could he be, this odd-looking man who had abruptly taken her under his wing and seemed intent on safeguarding her interests? Now and then she threw a glance at Phelps, as if asking his advice.

‘Have you by any chance a power of attorney?’

The question came as such a surprise that at first she hardly took it in. After a moment she replied:

'A power of attorney? Let's see. Yes, I have one. Unless I left it in France ...'

Before coming out to Africa Ferdinand had joined with a young man of about his own age in launching a fertilizer business. His partner had proved dishonest and the concern went into liquidation. As the court proceedings were still dragging on when he was about to sail for Africa, he had given Emilienne a power of attorney, drawn up by Maître Tassin, to enable her to watch his interests.

'I'll have more to tell you later on,' said Macassis, with a sidelong glance at Phelps and Crosby.

From that moment he took no more notice of her, whereas Phelps kept fidgeting in his chair, evidently desiring to start a conversation. But it was she who made the first move.

'Captain Phelps, I believe?' she said quite naturally. 'Excuse me if I'm mistaken.'

He rose, bowed, and bent over the hand she held out to him.

'Ferdinand often mentioned you in his letters. Has he really gone?'

'Just a moment, please. May I introduce Major Crosby, who runs an elephant farm not far from the plantation, and of course knows Monsieur Graux?'

'I know ...'

A little stiffly, it seemed, Major Crosby rose from his seat, bent over Emilienne's hand and put his lips to it as the young man had done. Both men remained standing.

'Please sit down.'

'Won't you have something to drink? You're quite wet still ...'

She hesitated for a moment, then said:

'Thanks. I might have a liqueur of some sort. I was air-sick yesterday in the plane, and I got up at four this morning.' Then, staring at the floor, she added quickly: 'Has Lady Makinson left too?'

'Yes, she took the plane yesterday. We saw her off.'

A faint smile, that the two men failed to understand, came to her lips. She had remembered her 'intuition' on the plane.

During the flight she hadn't spoken to any of the other passengers, and they had been rather puzzled by this tall, fair, placid young woman who kept so severely to herself and whose appearance was so little French or Belgian. Once or twice she had actually been addressed in German!

On the previous afternoon, soon after leaving Malakal, they had passed another plane going in the opposite direction. Following the Airways custom, the two machines had approached to salute each other, and for a moment were so near that one could see through the windows the faces of the homeward-bound passengers.

True, she had not caught sight of Ferdinand, but suddenly it had flashed across her mind, that he might be on board the passing plane. The idea was so far-fetched that she promptly rejected it. None the less it left an imprint on her mind, for that evening at the hotel it had been on the tip of her tongue to ask if Ferdinand Graux had been seen there earlier in the day.

The only thing, indeed, that prevented her from asking was her distaste for giving way to superstitious fancies.

'Will Lady Makinson be coming back?' she asked in a low tone.

Phelps could not hide his amazement, and even Major Crosby looked up sharply.

'Oh no. She's on her way to Stamboul, where her husband is.'

'Yes?'

They were talking in undertones. Macassis couldn't overhear what they were saying. A boy had just placed a glass of Chartreuse on the table in front of her, and Emilienne was sipping it.

'Did Ferdinand tell you anything about his plans?' she asked bluntly.

Phelps looked uncomfortable, and Crosby came to his rescue.

‘No, we only had a glimpse of him, you see, just as the plane was taking off.’

Dinner was served, and separated them, Emilienne being given a table to herself.

Smith and Macassis dined together in a corner. They were the only ones who talked, and, as they always did, employed the native dialect; while Phelps smoked cigarettes between the courses, watching Emilienne from the corner of an eye.

The car returned while they were having the dessert, which consisted of biscuits and mangoes whose smell of turpentine made Emilienne almost sick, though the flavour pleased her. Macassis had a long palaver with the driver, who looked furious.

‘Would you come for a moment, mademoiselle?’

He did not rise as she came up to him; neither introduced himself nor held out his hand.

‘Sit down, please. It’s all fixed up. He’ll sell his car to you for six thousand francs, and as he overcharged you two thousand for the trip here, you need only pay him four. Have you the money?’

‘Yes.’ She opened her handbag.

‘No, don’t give him French notes. Smith will change them for Belgian ones. You’ll gain over the exchange.’

The strangest thing was that he took all this trouble on her behalf without the least show of amiability. Sulkily the half-caste pocketed the notes, saying:

‘And now, how the devil am I going to get back?’

‘I’m going to Juha to-morrow, and I’ll give you a lift.’ He turned to Emilienne. ‘There’s no filling-station between here and the plantation, so you must take a hundred litres with you. You go straight ahead for a hundred and thirty miles, till you see a letter-box nailed to a tree and a turning to the right. You take that turning, and the bungalow’s twenty-five miles farther on.’

‘You were talking to me just now about the concession ...’

'That's no business of mine. But I'll tell you this much. I advise you to pay whatever sum the Belgian Government demand, to make the title permanent. And to waste no time about it, in case they change their minds. There may be a new ministry any day, and I suspect Graux has some pull with the present one.'

'Have you seen him recently?'

'Graux? No, I haven't.'

'Used you to see him often?'

'Not once in a year. But I know him well.'

After a brief hesitation she asked in a low tone:

'Do you know why he's left?'

At which he merely shrugged his shoulders and looked away. After all, why should he know? She could make nothing of this queer, half-naked man, so unlike anyone she had seen before or even dreamt of. All the same, she realized he meant her well, and felt a little comforted.

'You've been most kind. I can't tell you how grateful ...

He cut her short. 'Don't mention it!'

'I shall do my best ...' she began.

'That's enough!' he said abruptly and, rising, went to get an electric torch to light the way to his bedroom.

His 'That's enough!' might have merely indicated that he wished to close the conversation, but Emilienne guessed its meaning was: 'If you do your best, that's enough.'

'Good night, mademoiselle.'

'Good night, monsieur.'

She was standing. When she went back to her chair, she had only Captain Phelps to talk to; the half-caste driver was playing draughts with Smith.

At eight in the morning it was still raining, but the clouds were a little lighter. The two cars were drawn up outside the hotel, their engines turning over, Emilienne's in front. Smith was moving to and fro between the cars, seeing that the luggage was properly stowed, the tanks full – he himself worked

the petrol-pump – and everything in order. When Phelps walked up to Emilienne the major smiled to himself.

‘Our friend Crosby,’ said Phelps, ‘will travel at his usual break-neck speed. As we have to call at the plantation in any case, to have a look at the plane, I suggest you take me in your car. But perhaps I’m indiscreet ...’

‘Not a bit,’ she said promptly. ‘Come with me by all means.’

Macassis was hovering in the background, looking rather offended. Evidently he resented her willingness to be in both camps at once. But of course she knew nothing of the feud between them.

Phelps climbed into the seat beside her, and the car moved off through the rain-sodden compound and turned into the road, which was bordered by deep gullies full of water. Gradually the green walls of the bush, behind which were hidden the black cones of native huts, closed in on either hand.

They had gone little more than a mile when the big car with the aluminium body whizzed past and was almost immediately out of sight.

Ferdinand Graux had never taken to Phelps, whom he regarded as a conceited, not to say uppish, young man. Emilienne, however, from the start felt on an equal footing with him; indeed on a slightly superior footing. For she realized that at bottom Phelps was shy, and the free-and-easy manner he affected a defensive reflex.

It was she who first broached the subject, her eyes fixed on the road ahead, on which twice already they had all but run over coveys of guinea-fowl.

‘Did he take the same plane as Lady Makinson?’

‘Yes, and it was a near thing he didn’t miss it. We had no idea he was behind us. He must have telephoned from Bodi to reserve his seat. Smith would know; I forgot to ask him.’

There was a long silence. Two blacks appeared, walking along the roadside, the man carrying a bow and arrows, the woman a roll of mats balanced on her head. On catching sight

of the car they dived into the bush and were lost to sight behind the tall, rain-drenched grass. At last Phelps ventured to ask:

‘Did Ferdinand know you were coming?’

‘No. The arrangement was that I was to come out after the rains, and the missionary at Niangara was to marry us there.’

He made no comment. After another long pause he said:

‘Sure you’re not getting tired? Suppose I drive for a bit?’

‘No, thanks.’

Driving the car was doing her good; it kept her mind concentrated on the problems of the road, which was dotted with pot-holes. And, to add to her difficulties, the hood leaked and flurries of drops kept sweeping across her eyes. Each of them had one arm wet; she her left arm, he his right.

At one point they came on a gang of Negroes working on the road, the men Macassis had had called out. In the course of the night they had run up a dyke of sodden earth to divert the torrent rushing across the road. Now, to make the road-surface negotiable, they were cutting swathes of elephant-grass and strewing them across it.

In spite of this the wheels slipped a good deal and it took some skilful driving on Emilienne’s part getting through. The village headman, the only one of the blacks who wore a cap, gave them a military salute; the fact that his friend Macassis had routed him out in the middle of the night to attend to the road had convinced him that the travellers were persons of importance.

‘Is it the same sort of country all the way?’ Emilienne asked.

‘Much the same. But it looks quite different when the sun is out.’

‘What are the natives like in these parts?’

‘You’ve seen for yourself. Quite harmless people really, just like children. Ferdinand told me that the Logos are the gentlest of the lot, and the best looking.’

The nakedest, too. The women had nothing on but a tuft of dry grass hung sporran-wise in front, and the men a square of cloth worn like an apron.

'Was Lady Makinson badly hurt in the crash?'

'At first we thought so. She was convinced her leg was broken, but actually she'd only put out her knee ... A cigarette?'

'Thanks, I don't smoke.'

'You don't mind if I ...?'

'Not a bit.'

Nevertheless each time the smoke from his cigarette drifted towards her he flicked it away.

'Who's that man who made me buy this car?'

'Another Englishman! Really you've no luck. On your first day in the Congo everybody you meet is English. And the only Belgian, Smith, has an English name and most likely comes of English stock.'

'What does he do?'

'Smith, you mean?'

'No, the other man. Macassis, isn't it?'

'Oh, nothing much. He just enjoys life, in his fashion. He discovered a gold-mine forty years ago. But what he really discovered was Africa - and the charm of black women. Major Crosby can't stick him. He says an Englishman who goes native like that is a disgrace to his country.'

'Was the major a friend of Ferdinand's?'

'They saw each other now and again. But Graux is a man who likes keeping to himself, I imagine. If it hadn't been for a pure fluke, a plane that crashed in his plantation the other day ...'

'Yes,' she said pensively.

'Sorry!'

'Why?'

'I mean, I shouldn't have mentioned that,' he said uncomfortably.

Nothing could have amazed him more than the question she asked him now, casting a quick glance at his face.

‘And you?’

He guessed at once what she meant, but it caught him unprepared.

‘Oh, it isn’t the same thing at all, you know.’ He forced a smile to his lips.

‘No?’

‘Lady Makinson was just a very dear friend, a real pal ... You see what I mean?’

‘I’m trying to.’

To his surprise, this young Englishman, trained from his public school days to regard talk about his private feelings as taboo, found himself doing what he could never have done with another man: unfolding to a girl whom he had met for the first time the previous evening things of a most delicate order and intimately concerning himself.

‘Graux didn’t understand a bit. He thought I was jealous!’ He hesitated, but her calmness and the look in her eyes emboldened him to continue. ‘Lady Makinson was like a ... a cousin to me, if you see what I mean. We met in a boat going to Tahiti; the other passengers were a stuffy lot, mostly high officials. So we spent most of our time on the boat-deck, sun-bathing and – would you believe it? – reading poetry. Lady Makinson is an awfully well-read woman.’

‘Is she?’ There was a touch of petulance in Emilienne’s voice.

‘Sir Ronald, her husband, hates travelling. He’s a great authority on military matters. All he wants is to be left in peace ... You see what I mean?’ he added naively.

‘I see.’ She managed to say it without irony.

‘Ferdinand got it all wrong. Towards the end I tried to explain things to him, but it wasn’t any use.’

A silence followed. They were driving through a village,

the natives scampering into their huts as they caught sight of the car.

'I rather think that once he's over there he'll understand,' said Phelps at last

"Over there"?

'At Stamboul, I mean. Sir Ronald has rooms in the Embassy at Therapia, but he usually stays in his big modern flat in Pera, the European quarter of Stamboul. Do you know it?'

'No.'

'It's rather like your Auteuil. Full of kiddies who talk every European language, nannies in uniform. Life's one long round of tea-fights, bridge-parties, dances, soirées and the rest of it.'

What exactly did the young man mean, she wondered, when he implied that 'over there' Ferdinand's eyes would at last be opened? Did he think that his glimpses of the pomp and circumstance hedging a British diplomat's wife would have this effect? Or the sight of Lady Makinson herself, with her children, amongst her friends?

'Another forty miles,' Phelps said, 'will bring us to the letter-box.'

Forty miles of silence. Emilienne was the first to catch sight of the box with a big 'F.G.' painted on it. So that was where his letters to her had been posted every week. She made a sharp swerve, apologized and, involuntarily pressing the accelerator, reached the bungalow without realizing the distance they had covered. The aluminium car was drawn up not far from the plane, which had been brought across the river and was now quite near the bungalow.

A tall young man wearing leather gaiters rushed forward and opened the door of the car.

'Mademoiselle Emilienne!' He could hardly get the words out.

'Hullo, Camille!' she said quite calmly.

'When Major Crosby came, I could hardly ...'

'Would you mind taking my valises to the bedroom? My heavy luggage is coming on by boat and won't be here for a month.'

She was taking eager draughts of this unfamiliar air of Africa, noting every detail; yet outwardly she had the look of a woman who has come home after a few weeks' absence.

'What will you have to drink, Captain Phelps?' she asked as they stepped on to the verandah. 'Been here long, Major Crosby?'

The major was pleasantly surprised; she had addressed him in English, excellent English too, to which a slight accent gave an added charm.

'No, not very long,' he replied.

'Camille!'

'Yes, mademoiselle.'

'I hope that Major Crosby and Captain Phelps will stay for lunch. You've everything that's needed, haven't you?'

'Oh yes. There's fish from the river, and I can open some tins.'

She hadn't realized how tired she was till she stretched herself in a hammock-chair. Suddenly she felt incapable of making the least movement, or even talking, until she had had a long spell of rest and, above all, solitude. Nevertheless she summoned up the energy to say to Phelps:

'Help yourself to whisky, won't you, Captain?'

Then she laid her hand, still wet with rain, on her forehead, which was burning, though her cheeks were pale.

CHAPTER VII

THE drone of the receding car could still be heard in the distance when Emilienne, coming back to the room where empty glasses and full ashtrays marked the places of the

departed guests, gave way at last and let her face relax. And not her face only. Her shoulders sagged, and raising her hands in an impulsive gesture she ran them through her hair, ruffling for once its smoothness, and a long lock straggled down her left cheek.

'Oh, Camille!' she sighed, gazing forlornly round, too tired, it seemed, even to move to a chair and settle into it.

'It gave me quite a turn, seeing you like that,' Camille confessed. 'You were the last person I expected here.'

At last she sat down, poured out a glass of water and sipped it slowly.

'They've worn me out.'

All the same, it was she who had asked Phelps and the major to stay. And not only had she given them lunch, but she had deliberately prolonged the conversation after it, desultory and trivial as their talk had been – precisely because she was dreading the moment that was bound to come, and had come now.

'Take a chair, Camille. You know quite well you needn't stand on ceremony with me.'

They were of exactly the same age and had known each other from their earliest days. In those times Camille called Émilienne by her Christian name, and she still called him by his.

'How did it come about?' she asked; then, without waiting for him to reply, caught herself up. 'That's a silly question! Of course I know the answer as well as you do ... Do you think he'll come back?'

'I'm sure of it,' said Camille stoutly.

'Why are you so sure?'

'Because he's bound to get cured sooner or later.'

She had a weak smile.

'So you think he's ill?'

Now for the first time she was able to take a good look at the house and its surroundings. Her eyes strayed to a shot-gun hanging on the wall, and she recognized it as one he had bought for her against her coming to the tropics.

'Was this the room they spent most of their time in?'

'No, they were oftener on the verandah. It wasn't raining then. The last fortnight was really terrible; I've rarely known it so sultry, and one was always waiting for a storm that wouldn't break.'

The cumulative weariness of the last few days was taking effect, her gaze had lost its keenness, and she looked now as she felt, a thoroughly exhausted young woman. After some minutes' silence she asked:

'Do you know a man they call Macassis?'

'Yes, he's a friend of Ferdinand's.'

'Oh! ... We'll have to start talking shop presently.'

'Can't that wait till to-morrow? You'd much better take a rest.'

'No, I'd rather tackle it at once. It'll do me good. By the way - that Negro girl who waited on us at lunch, is it she?'

He nodded.

'Ask her to come. I hadn't a chance of looking at her then.'

Baligi remained standing, her eyes wide with curiosity, while Emilienne gazed at her thoughtfully.

'So you're Baligi?'

'Yes, madame.'

'You're a pretty girl ... Now go!'

She dragged herself to Ferdinand's room to get an aspirin from her dressing-case. Her head felt heavy as lead and there was a throbbing in her temples. The rain was still pouring down. It would soon be time to light the lamps.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, then stretched herself on it with the intention of resting for a quarter of an hour to let the aspirin take effect.

An hour later Camille began to feel uneasy at the silence in the bungalow. Peeping into the room he saw her lying fully dressed on the bed, sound asleep; and he tiptoed away.

At Moulins it was always she who drove the car, for her father had never mastered the art of driving; with the result that when he had appointments in the country Emilienne had always to accompany him.

She was capable of sitting for hours at the wheel, her gaze so rigid that she seemed to be thinking about nothing except the road ahead.

Several times Camille, who sat beside her, tried to start a conversation, but all he could get out of her was an occasional nod.

At about nine, when they had already been a good hour on the road, there came a sudden break in the clouds and, though rain continued falling, the sun showed, ringed with silvery haze, across a veil of tumbling water. Then abruptly, as if a tap had been turned off, the rain stopped, and half an hour later the road was bone-dry, though torrents were racing by on either side.

They were now only some twelve miles from Niagara. Suddenly Emilienne gave a slight start and listened intently. She had just heard a curious thudding sound, the source of which was quite impossible to locate; there was no knowing if it were close at hand or miles away. An army on the march, the rhythmic shouting of an excited crowd, a subterranean disturbance – all sorts of explanations crossed her mind.

Camille, who had his eyes fixed on her face, noticed her look of anxiety.

‘Tom-toms,’ he said.

‘Oh? I’ve heard them before, but they didn’t sound the same.’

While he, too, was wondering what it could mean, they came upon some blacks carrying a covered litter in which a dignified-looking African, a native chief presumably, sat in state.

‘Silly of me!’ he exclaimed. ‘I’d quite forgotten. There’s a Big Palaver on to-morrow at Niagara.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Twice a year the chiefs come in to District headquarters for a ceremonial gathering. They discuss affairs of state and sit in a tribunal to try important cases – murders, adulteries, cattle-thefts and so on.’

She had ceased listening and hardly gave another glance to the long files of Negroes they were passing, trudging doggedly ahead like pilgrims on their way to some celebrated shrine. Now and again they came on a chief dressed in European clothes surrounded by his wives and a bevy of black retainers.

‘Tell me, Camille ...’

‘Yes?’

‘Oh, nothing ...’ What was it she’d meant to ask him?

As she had left Moulins before the date originally fixed, the tropical outfit she had ordered wasn’t yet ready. So she had travelled in a grey silk frock whose neat, provincial aspect clashed with the sun-helmet she had bought at Alexandria on the advice of one of the Imperial Airways staff

‘Is that the town?’

‘Yes. Turn to the left when we enter the park.’

She took it all quite calmly. Even such an unfamiliar sight as a group of stark-naked Negroes whirling in a tribal dance around their chief won from her no more than a fleeting glance. At the entrance of Niagara they passed another batch of dancers, holding grotesque masks in front of their faces as they capered to and fro

For some distance the road was flanked by wooden shacks, which proved to be shops, crammed with all sorts of merchandise: hardware, tinned foods, sewing machines, gramophones. Greeks and Armenians lounged in the doorways, and some of them stepped out into the road to watch the European girl driving past.

Then came a red-and-green park, like Smith’s but much larger, in the midst of which were three elegantly planned buildings, rather like Riviera villas.

'Drive to the central building,' Camille counselled. 'That's where the office is. The big house on the right is the Commissioner's. His assistant lives in the other one.'

The park was crammed with natives, some squatting on the roadside, others moving to and fro, grinning and bawling greetings at each other, and the cheerful bustle reminded Emilienne of a French village fair.

The entrance door of the central building stood open. After parking her car outside, Emilienne went up the steps, followed by Camille. In a big room, the walls of which were plastered with notices in French and Flemish, two men were at work, a white man and a black, the former in white ducks, the latter in khaki.

'Good morning, Monsieur Bodet,' said Camille. 'This is Mademoiselle Tassin, Ferdinand's fiancée.'

Ink-pots, blotting-pads, file-cases, sheaves of official forms. The air was like a furnace, and Bodet, who wore a stiff collar and black tie, looked thoroughly unhappy.

'Sit down,' he said, without rising. The harshness of his voice and the oddly furtive glances he was casting at Emilienne astonished her so much that she turned to Camille to see if he shared her surprise.

'I suppose you want to see the Commissioner,' Bodet continued. 'As it so happens, he's not in the office just now.'

The man seemed a bundle of nerves; in fact, the curious glitter of his eyes made Emilienne suspect he had been drinking – yet it was only ten in the morning.

'Have you a passport?'

'Yes. I've brought it with me.'

'And a permit to reside in the Congo?'

'I shall apply for one. At present I have only a transit visa.'

'You'll have to fix that up with the Commissioner.'

'Where is he?' Camille asked.

Bodet pointed with his pen across the road towards a sort

of shed on which was a notice-board inscribed: '*Police-commissionnaire (Natives)*.' It was surrounded by a crowd of Negroes.

'When will he be leaving court?'

'When he's had enough of it he'll adjourn.'

Bodet got up and opened the door of a cupboard. While he was hidden by the door they clearly heard the sound of a bottle being uncorked. After a couple of minutes he slouched back to his seat and asked rather crossly:

'Do you propose to wait here?'

His eyes settled on Emilienne for the first time. There was a vague hostility in them, as if he knew in advance that he was going to dislike her.

She too was feeling the heat, her hands were moist with sweat

'Ferdinand often spoke of your wife in his letters. I wonder if I could look her up?'

He bounded to his feet as if he had been stung, and looked like going off into a fit of rage. Then suddenly he grew calm and chuckled to himself

'So you want to see Yette, do you? That will be a treat! . . . It's that house there, on the left.'

It was exhausting, indeed nerve-racking, to watch him, and Emilienne breathed more freely once she was outside.

'What's the matter with him?' she asked Camille.

'I don't know. But I shouldn't be surprised if he's in for an attack of dengue fever.' Camille, too, had been startled by Bodet's appearance and behaviour.

'We'd better leave the car here. We shall get there quicker on foot.'

They crossed a lawn which was being mowed by convicts in brown-and-yellow uniform, and stopped under the portico of the bungalow Bodet had pointed out. Camille shouted several times

'Anyone there?'

All the doors stood open; they could see a large untidy

room, a table laid for breakfast, a man's pyjamas lying on a sofa.

'Anyone about?'

Emilienne had noticed a boy peeping at them from behind the bungalow. But she preferred to let Camille go about it in his own way, and watched him enter the bungalow, knock at doors, and finally turn the handle of one.

A woman's voice shrilled furiously:

'What is it? What do you want?'

Camille retreated, while Emilienne walked forward. A moment later Yette appeared, in a dressing-gown, her hair straggling down her cheeks, which were beaded with sweat.

'What is it?' she repeated. She cut as strange a figure as her husband.

'I'm Ferdinand Graux's fiancée. You remember him, don't you? You came out on the same plane.'

'What do you want of me?' She flung herself on to the sofa and started sobbing. 'Go away! Oh, *please*, go away!' she wailed. 'No! Wait! If you knew how sick and tired I am of – of everything!' Suddenly she jerked her head up. 'Where's Ferdinand? Is it true he's run away with that Englishwoman?'

It was confusing to watch her movements. She sprang up from the sofa, walked to a low chair, but no sooner had she sat down on it than she jumped up again and pointed to a settee.

'Sit down, won't you? ... You can't understand, of course. But let me tell you something, something worth hearing, and you can repeat it to everybody when the time comes, if you feel like it. Because I – I've no money, I can't get away by plane, I've got to take what's coming to me.'

It was as painful as bursting in on a dispute between a married couple, and really it came to that, though one party was absent – which produced an eerie effect, like the ramblings of a medium in a séance-room.

'Have you seen Georges? Yes? What was your impression of him? Tell me frankly.'

'Well,' said Camille tactfully, 'I thought he looked a bit seedy. I should say he has a touch of fever.'

She gave a harsh laugh.

'Oh, that's what you thought, was it? So did I, at first. And I tried to nurse him, but he's been getting worse every day. I can tell you what's wrong with him; it isn't fever - he's going off his chump. And so am I! Cheerful prospect, isn't it? In fact, the only thing I'm wondering about is which of us will kill the other first.'

'Really, it can't be so bad as that,' Emilienne was heartily regretting having entered the bungalow. 'I'm quite sure you're exaggerating ...'

'Exaggerating, am I? It's all right for you to talk like that. *You* haven't got to live in this damned house. Just you try it for a week, only a week! ... Do you know Costemans? No? And that hell-cat of a wife of his? They're to blame for everything.'

She went on talking volubly, without pausing to take breath.

'I wanted to do the right thing, and the first day I was here I went to call on Madame Costemans. I wonder how you'd have liked it, having the door slammed in your face and being told her majesty would see you when it suited her. What right had she to treat me like mud? Her husband's District Commissioner and Georges is only his assistant - but they're in the same service, aren't they? Of course I know all about it now. The fellow who had my husband's post before him resigned the service, chucked his pension and everything, rather than go on working under Costemans. The truth is, Costemans will never get promotion: he'll have to stick it out at Niagara for the rest of his days. I've heard all about it; he got into a nasty mess some years ago, and that's why he was posted to this god-forsaken hole. He's only thirty and it was a facer for him, and for his wife. She's the daughter of a well-known barrister at Brussels and she's always wailing about

her husband's bad luck. The result is, they loathe everybody who comes here, especially the younger men who may climb over their heads one day and become vice-governors. In any big government office no one would dream of treating the most junior clerk like Costemans treats Georges. He flies out at him if he comes to office one minute late.'

Through the windows they could see the other bungalow, the Commissioner's, a hundred yards away.

'I was born in the East of Paris, near the Bastille, and I'm not ashamed to own it. I believe in calling a spade a spade and I didn't mince my words, you bet, when I went to see our leading lady. Since then my husband and Costemans aren't on speaking terms; when they have official business to discuss they do it in writing.'

There was no stopping her. She drew a quick breath, then hurried on:

'You noticed that Georges smelt of drink, of course? He's always drinking, and he's in terror of losing his job and not being able to get another one. He says that he'd never have a dog's chance in Europe, what with his attacks of malaria. And according to him it's all my fault! Did you ever hear such nonsense? The man's crazy! We're always having rows, of course. This morning he jumped up in the middle of breakfast, and when I ran after him to call him back he shook his fist at me – on the doorstep!'

Emilienne began to make a move.

'Please, please don't go,' Yette wailed. 'I know I'm boring you stiff. But, barring Georges, you're the first person I've had to talk to for ten days ... Oh, how stupid of me! I haven't even offered you a drink. What would you like?'

She smelt of sweat and sodden crêpe de Chine.

'Any news of Ferdinand? No? Georges was speaking of him yesterday, and he said in that nasty sneering way of his: "You see the sort of chap he really is, your precious Ferdinand!" That's because I was always talking to Georges about

him, saying what a nice, sensible fellow he was. But now – oh, I don't know.' She sank into a chair at last and mopped her streaming cheeks with a towel.

She would not let Emilienne go until she had promised to come back for lunch.

But 'I'll do my best' was as far as Emilienne would go.

It was a relief to escape from the bungalow. They had just had a glimpse of a crowd of natives pouring out of the court-house and a European in white walking rapidly across to the office.

Emilienne and Camille reached it just as he entered.

'Do you want to see me?' Costemans asked as he sat down at his desk and opened a file that was lying on it.

'I'm Ferdinand Graux's fiancée.'

'Oh? Pleased to meet you,' he said vaguely, with a slight, stiff inclination of his head, then waited ...

'I believe you have received from Brussels a communication relating to his estate and, as he is away, I've come to see you about it.'

Costemans was as lethargic as Bodet was excitable, and he, too, looked as if his health were bad. Young though he was, there were big, sallow half-moons under his eyes.

'I've a power of attorney,' Emilienne added.

He reached forward to take the document, murmuring:

'Excuse me ... It was so terribly hot in that court-room. And you can't imagine what the smell of forty or fifty Negroes in a confined space is like until you've experienced it!'

Bodet was writing away busily in the background

'Yes, this power is quite in order,' the Commissioner said, after studying the document. 'But I suggest we adjourn for lunch now. Yes, yes! My wife will be delighted to make your acquaintance.'

This insistence came as a surprise; his cordiality seemed as laboured as his courtesy.

'Good! We'll step across to my bungalow.'

‘But ...!’ She threw Bodet a glance, as if to show it wasn’t her fault ...

The lamps had been lit, the door of the bungalow closed for the night, and Emilienne sat facing Camille across the red-check table-cloth. As she took her napkin from the embroidered slip-case she felt an access of dizziness such as she sometimes had as a little girl in early spring after a long day’s outing in the country.

To steady herself she set her gaze roaming over the red-brick walls and the plain, massive furniture made by local carpenters, and Baligi waiting at table with shyly downcast eyes.

But memories of the day kept ranging through her mind, unpleasant memories almost without exception.

What was it Madame Costemans had said as they were sitting down to lunch?

‘I saw you going into her bungalow ... Really you can’t imagine how dreadful it is for us. Because she comes from Paris she thinks she ought to run the place. But she’s a gutter-bred Parisienne, quite impossible. If you’ll excuse my using such language, she’s a common little slut. It makes it so awkward having a woman like that trying to thrust herself upon one all the time.’

The Commissioner’s wife was wearing a bright blue silk dress. The furniture was one of those reach-me-down suites turned out by the thousand by the big stores, with everything thrown in, down to mustard-yellow cushions each adorned with a black cat in velvet. Antimaçassars, a piano, knick-knacks everywhere, a lavishly gilt dinner-service ...

‘Bodet is a hopeless fool and drinks like a fish. My husband’s got so tired of trying to keep him in his place that he’s given up speaking to him. It’ll end up badly, I feel sure. Really they ought to be more careful about the sort of men they send out to the Congo.’

They had discussed the question of the plantation in the drawing-room, so as to avoid going to the office. 'There's no reason why the Bodets should know all about it,' Madame Costemans had pointed out; after which she had stayed to listen to the conversation between her husband and Emilienne.

The Colonial Office had advised Niangara that Graux could buy the estate outright for two hundred thousand Belgian francs; in which case he would enjoy all the privileges accorded to Belgian planters in respect of the development of his land and preferential tariffs.

'Really all you have to do is to send a cheque to the treasurer of the Colonial Office. I'm merely a go-between in the transaction. Now I'll explain the procedure ...'

The Commissioner discovered that taxes on the plantation were in arrears for about four thousand francs, and Emilienne promptly gave him a cheque. That was the one bright spot of the day; as she signed the cheque she had the feeling that at last she was doing something of practical use.

'Have you a car?'

'Yes.'

'In that case I'll make a move. We have to carry on with the Big Palaver. If it would interest you to have a look ...'

'Thanks - but I'm rather tired.'

She would have liked to say *au revoir* to Yette, and walked towards her bungalow. Evidently she was seen approaching, for just as she put her foot on the first step the door shut with a bang! She was in half a mind to go up and knock, nevertheless, and explain why she hadn't been able to come to lunch. The thought of the young woman nursing her grievances in the empty bungalow, however futile and unreasonable these might be, weighed on Emilienne's mind; indeed she felt quite remorseful, conscious that Yette must be thinking she had let her down.

'Really one feels one must have dreamt it,' she remarked as they were leaving Niangara. 'It was all so fantastic.'

‘Talking about fantastic things,’ Camille put in, ‘do you know what I was told just now? This afternoon two niggers are coming up for trial, an old chap and his son-in-law. They killed the son-in-law’s wife and made a meal of her between them.’

The light had the same pearly lustre as in the morning, and the sky the deep translucence of a mountain lake. Now and again a Negress loped past the car, so lightly treading that she seemed to walk on air, her long sleek thighs and high-set breasts dappled with silvery glints.

‘Tell me, Camille. What’s your idea about Bodet? Do you think he really may do ... something desperate?’

‘All I know is that he was in a bad way already when he came out. And she – well, at first she took the Congo as light-heartedly as if she were at a picnic in the Paris suburbs. She giggled at everything she saw, and one had to keep reminding her to put her topee on.’

And then, without thinking, Camille came out with a remark which was to linger in the minds of both:

‘It’s not everyone who’s as level-headed as Ferdinand.’

Once again, half unconsciously, as they came in sight of the bungalow, Emilienne ran her eyes over it; and now she realized even more clearly than before how practical and solid it was, as if its very shape and structure – so unlike those of the bungalows at Niangara, for instance – were a reflection of its owner’s level-headedness. It was new, it had no ‘style’, and she had seen nothing of its kind in Europe; yet it had something of the dignity and spaciousness, the harmonious lines, of the old houses one sees on river-banks in France, which give one the impression of having been there since time immemorial.

Outside, the warm darkness was murmurous with tiny sounds; there was a ceaseless chirring, not unlike that of cicadas – what insect could it be? she wondered – and as she listened she fell to picturing this house as it had been before

her coming, during the last six years. With her mind's eye she saw Ferdinand seated each evening at his desk, covering sheets of airmail paper with those records of the day's events she knew so well; then, before turning in, settling down in a long chair to read some book on coffee-growing or political economy.

Camille, too, seemed lost in thought, and when they had finished dinner sat on unmoving, forgetting even to light the pipe he had just filled. Mosquitoes were humming round the electric lamp, and Baligi was clearing the table soundlessly, her bare feet seeming to glance across the floor, hardly touching it.

Then the sound of a sob broke the silence in the room. Emilienne had given way at last, and, resting her elbows on the table, she buried her face in her hands, her shoulders heaving. Baligi stopped abruptly and stood gazing at her wide-eyed, until Camille signed to her to go back to the kitchen.

Emilienne couldn't have explained what had come over her. That morning, for instance, or even two days before, in the air-liner, she had failed, when trying to visualize Ferdinand, to conjure up more than a vague and fleeting image of him, less like a living presence than the phantom of a day-dream.

She had no doubts about her love for him. If she had left her home and family at a moment's notice, it was because the thought of losing him had filled her with dismay; and she was prepared to do much more to keep him, if the need arose. And yet there had been something dreamlike about all that too.

But now, suddenly, just as the meal ended, after a day of chaotic, nightmarish experiences, she felt his real presence in this room, she even saw him standing there beside the table, large as life! And for the first time, perhaps, she had an insight into the man he really was, that secret self of which till now she had had no more than an inkling.

Tears were rolling down her cheeks, but they came as a relief, and were far less bitter than the savour that, all these last fateful days, had lingered on her palate. When she looked up her face was red with weeping, and it reminded Camille of her face as a little girl when she had hurt herself.

‘Did he ever speak of me?’ she asked.

‘Every day.’

‘What – what sort of thing did he say?’

‘He’d say, “When Emilienne comes, we’ll have to send for a refrigerator.” Or, “We might run up a shanty for you in the compound. That way Emilienne will feel more at ease in the bungalow.”’

She looked at him eagerly, still sniffing now and again.

‘Anything else?’

‘He’s ordered a first-rate gramophone and a box of records, which should arrive next week. Not jazz; good classical and modern music. We’ve already fitted a wall-plug for the pick-up.’

‘Where is it?’

‘Just behind you, on the right of the fireplace. He was awfully worried about the bricks, you know ...’

‘What bricks?’

‘I mean, the walls. It was one of his fads, leaving the walls bare instead of having them distempered or papered. And he was afraid you’d find them rather depressing. He was always wondering if he shouldn’t change them, though it would have gone against the grain, I know. He built this room practically with his own hands.’

‘But I, too, like plain brick,’ she said with a wan smile.

‘When he came back last time he told me you’d got your nursing certificate, and he proposed to make a lot of improvements in the infirmary, as you’d probably be spending much of your time there.’

‘When he spoke of me – what exactly did he call me?’

Camille seemed surprised.

'Why, "Emilienne" of course.'

'Did he never say "my fiancée"?'

'No, I never heard him say that. But he often used to begin a remark with "When my wife comes out ..."'

'Oh, Camille! ... No, don't take any notice, please.' She couldn't stop crying, but the tears were coming slower now. She took a handkerchief from her bag.

'Suppose I left you for a bit ...?' Camille suggested.

She shook her head. It did her good to be sitting here with Camille, exactly as Ferdinand used to sit here night after night, listening to the jungle sounds outside.

'What animal is making that queer howling noise?'

'A hyena. He did his best to get rid of them, but they keep coming back. One gets used to their noise.'

Still, she could not repress a slight shudder. She felt hot and cold all over. Camille, who had been listening, remarked:

'Do you hear? The rain's started again. We have two full months of it before us yet. Still, it might be worse. In some districts the rains last for six months of the year. At Matadi, for instance, Bodet's first station.'

An unfortunate remark. The last thing she wanted was to have the tiresome little civil servant intruding in her thoughts; especially as he brought in his train Yette, Madame Costemans and her baby – for the good lady had a baby.

Emilienne rose. She almost dreaded the solitude of her bedroom, that had been Ferdinand's ...

'Camille!'

'Yes?'

'Tell me' – she looked away – 'did she ever sleep there ... with him?'

'Never,' he said emphatically. It was only a half-lie. They had never spent a whole night there together.

'Don't wake me to-morrow morning, please. I need a good long rest.'

And it was Camille who had tears in his eyes when he shook

her hand and bade her 'Good night'. As he undressed he was muttering to himself, and Baligi had passed clean out of his mind.

CHAPTER VIII

SOMETIMES Phelps had to wait an hour or more before she appeared, but he did so without the least sign of impatience. On the contrary, he seemed to relish having the bungalow to himself and making himself at home in it.

He always arrived at the same hour, four exactly, in Crosby's car, which had already done its daily hundred-and-twenty miles' run, and his first glance round told him where Emilienne was that afternoon.

When it was raining, the infirmary door stood open; which meant that this was where work was going on, for she had decided to set on foot at once the alterations planned by Ferdinand.

On fine afternoons he had glimpses of her - always with Camille, looking quite the model 'factor', in attendance - walking on the hillside among the coffee plants or on the river-bank inspecting the turbines.

He never went down there to join her, but stayed on the verandah smoking cigarettes and gazing vaguely at the view. Camille had revealed to him the existence of a small ice-making machine, worked by hand, and he turned the handle with exemplary persistence till Emilienne came back to the bungalow, usually tired out.

Two tumblers stood ready on a table. He always sprang promptly to his feet, dived forward to kiss her hand, and announced with an air of vexation:

'It isn't here yet.'

A remark which had come to have, for them, a double meaning. Officially, so to speak, Phelps drove to Niangara

every morning to find out if the propeller had arrived at Juba, where Imperial Airways was to deliver it.

But on the second day Emilienne had said to him in a casual tone:

‘By the way, if there’s a telegram come in for me, you might bring it along.’

And so, when ostensibly referring to the propeller, they had a second thought in mind.

The manufacturers had reported that they had no spare propeller suitable for Lady Makinson’s plane in stock and they were having one made; which meant considerable delay. To make things worse, there had been some muddle over the first cables exchanged.

And likewise no news of Ferdinand had come through. But they professed not to be surprised at this, and indeed went farther, talking about him as if his absence were quite natural – as though, for instance, he were on a business trip.

It was Phelps who, with an innocent air, had invented the rules of this game of make-believe. Camille had taken longest to get the hang of it, and still was apt to break the rules by showing signs of discouragement.

‘Tell me, Camille! Is there any special reason for not having curtains on the windows?’

Camille gave a start; his thoughts were far from window-curtains.

‘Any special reason? No, of course not. I believe there’s the material for them somewhere about. Somehow we never found time to attend to them.’

She unearthed the material and was busy making the curtains when Phelps arrived from Niangara with the usual negative report.

He promptly sat down beside her and, just as he used to hand lighted cigarettes to Lady Makinson, fell to handing her the scissors and threading needles when she needed them.

He made no attempt to flirt with her. At any moment she

could look into his eyes and see nothing there beyond frank camaraderie; and indeed they got on together excellently. He chattered away on all sorts of subjects, especially such as concerned him personally, with a naïveté that often took her by surprise. Thus very soon she knew all about his father and his uncle, the plutocratic owners of the Phelps Line, their eccentricities, their clashes with him and with their business rivals.

Phelps gave some more turns to the ice-machine, then filled Emilienne's glass. And presently, when the curtains were sewn, it was he who climbed a ladder and fixed up the rods and brackets, not without hitting his fingers with the hammer several times.

Once he was in the bungalow he seemed reluctant to make a move. On the first two days when it was getting on for six he rose from his chair and said lugubriously:

'Well, I suppose I should be getting back to Crosby's.'

On the third evening he stayed on while Baligi was laying the table, and Emilienne felt bound to suggest out of politeness:

'Won't you stay for dinner? Though I'm afraid there's nothing much to eat.'

'That's all right. I never have much appetite in the evenings.'

So he stayed to dinner, and thereafter it became an institution; a place was always laid for him and he never left before eight.

He did his best to make himself useful, brought small presents – especially English specialities, pickles, biscuits, chocolates and the like – and Emilienne couldn't help smiling, since obviously all these things came from Major Crosby's store-room.

She had sent to Brussels all the documents needed to complete the purchase of the plantation, and written to her father asking him to remit two hundred thousand Belgian francs to the Colonial Office. She had some money of her own, left her

by her mother; but in any case her father would never have dreamt of refusing this request.

'The bungalow is very comfortable,' she wrote to him, *'and I think life will be quite pleasant.'* And all she said about Ferdinand was: *'He is away for the moment. When he returns ...'*

There was so much to be done that she had little time for brooding. She was up and about, always followed by the faithful Camille, from morn till night, under sun or rain, supervising work in progress, and often, when visiting the power-plant, she brought one of Ferdinand's handbooks with her and with its aid studied the working of the machines.

Camille always glared at Phelps the moment he appeared at the bungalow. And Phelps retaliated by affecting not to see him, or treating him off-handedly.

One day Phelps persuaded Emilienne to come to lunch at Major Crosby's and have a look at the elephant-training farm of which she had heard so much. It rather disappointed her. There was no resemblance at all to Ferdinand's plantation or his pleasant, unpretentious bungalow.

One had the impression of entering military barracks, colonial barracks it is true, but barracks none the less, what with the gravelled courtyard ringed round by low sheds each with a notice-board over the doorway, barns for storing fodder, and, at the far end, a squat two-storey building, Crosby's quarters.

To complete the military effect, all orders were conveyed by bugle-calls, and a parade of the blacks took place morning and evening in the yard.

Emilienne did not see the elephants till they came back from the day's training just before sunset, ridden by their mahouts, who let them splash and flounder for some minutes in the river to cool themselves and drink. After that they were led to their respective stalls and there followed a methodical grooming-down, on cavalry lines, under the severe eye of the major, whose hunting-crop never left his hand.

Two or three times a year he organized an elephant-hunt with a whole army of natives and some trained elephants. The captured wild elephants were gradually broken in, like horses, taught to kneel and rise at the mahout's order, then harnessed for traction work.

'Once they're thoroughly trained I can sell them for fifty thousand francs,' the major told her. 'The elephants that draw the dust-carts at Stanleyville all come from my farm. So do Ferdinand's elephants. And I hire out some of my stock to farmers for ploughing, for ten thousand francs a year.'

Nevertheless, Emilienne gathered, it was not a paying proposition, expenses being extremely heavy. And as Crosby had no private means, he had arranged to be subsidized by various British and Belgian groups.

Up to the hour of going to bed, despite innumerable whiskies, and though living by himself, Crosby kept up a standard of decorum as to his habits and appearance that would have passed muster in his Singapore or London club.

Though it was pitch dark when Emilienne left, Phelps did not insist on accompanying her back. All he did was to give her a loaded shot-gun, which he placed beside her in the car.

'Perhaps there'll be some news to-morrow - of my propeller,' he said as he bade her good-night.

But there was no news of his propeller, or of Ferdinand. All the same when, after bowing to kiss Emilienne's hand, he looked up, she guessed at once that there was something. But she preferred to match his discretion with her own, and refrained from putting questions. She sank into a long chair, for, in spite of her show of energy, she was utterly fagged out. In fact, she deliberately tired herself out day after day so as to ensure a night of heavy, dreamless sleep.

'Do you know,' he suddenly exclaimed with a friendly

smile, 'I'll feel quite lost when I shan't have to come here every afternoon.'

As he had felt 'quite lost' when he'd had no more cigarettes to light for Lady Makinson. It seemed as if the young airman found it necessary for his peace of mind to live in tow of some young woman, even if this involved threading needles or hammering nails into a wall.

'Why do you say that?'

'Because the propeller's bound to be turning up one of these days.'

Did he mean 'the propeller' to be taken literally, or in a figurative sense? She had given a slight start when he spoke, and couldn't help glancing at his pocket - which perhaps contained the telegram.

'Just think! I'll be two days and nights all by myself with the stars above and a watery grave beneath!' When he smiled, as he did now, his white teeth showed to advantage, and Emilienne suspected he was conscious of this. It had struck her several times that there was a feminine streak in the young man, fearless though he was. 'So I want to make the most of our little nook before I go.' And his eyes roved the verandah, the brick walls, the big sleeve-chairs - all that went to make the 'little nook'.

Then at last he came out with it.

'There was a letter for me - from Stamboul.'

He took it from his pocket. The envelope was addressed in a big sprawling handwriting; a woman's, Emilienne saw at once.

'You read English, I know. Yes, it's quite all right. There's nothing private in it.'

While she was reading he helped himself to a whisky-and-soda.

'Dear Jimmy, - As you see I've arrived sooner than expected, as it only took me four days to Stamboul. I didn't feel like waiting for the boat at Port Said or Alex. and spending two days at sea. So I wired

to Ronald to see if he could fix things up with the Admiralty, and I was flown across from Alex. to the Bosphorus on a naval seaplane.

'Ronald is very fit. The Embassy has already moved to Therapia for the summer and we shall rent a house there so as to have the children with us.

'If you had any anxieties about my journey, they weren't needed. It went off without a hitch. In fact, I'm rather pleased with myself about it. I'll tell you the whole story when we meet at Aix-les-Bains in September, as Ronald intends to do his cure there and I propose to go with him.

'Any news of the propeller? I called up London but could get nothing definite.

'All the best to Major Crosby and, needless to say, to yourself, dear Jimmy.

'Yours,

Mary'

Emilienne felt too shy to question him, but she would have dearly liked to hear his views on the two phrases, the only ones that mattered in the letter: 'It went off without a hitch', and the next sentence.

But what had prompted Lady Makinson to ask to be taken across the Mediterranean in a naval plane instead of following the usual route? And why was she 'pleased with herself'? To understand what lay behind those words she would have needed to know Lady Makinson – and she had never set eyes on her.

'I think we should feel pleased too,' said Phelps rather timidly, after some minutes' silence.

She swung round towards him, more eagerly than she would have wished.

'Do you really think so?'

'Yes, quite definitely. If Mary mentions those things, it can only mean ...' He paused, obviously wondering how to put it in not too crude a way. 'It can only mean that everything's quite all right now, if you see what I mean.'

For everything to be 'quite all right', the obvious condition was that the affair between Lady Makinson and Ferdinand should have come to an end. Unless ...

Unless – what? There was that unknown quantity, Lady Makinson's temperament, or rather her outlook on life. Probably she regarded it as 'quite all right' when she travelled about the world with Jimmy, had him stay at her house, and watched him fraternizing with her husband – while all the time the relations between herself and the young man were far from being exclusively platonic.

Really, Emilienne would rather have had no news at all. Now it had come she would go on racking her brain to guess the meaning of those trivial sentences, open to so many interpretations.

'Oh, and I've something else to tell you,' Phelps added, with a clumsy eagerness to change the subject. 'Someone you know at Niagara came and had a talk with me. I wonder if you'd care to hear about it?'

She guessed the Bodets were concerned. She thought of them at times, and indeed that very morning, as it so happened, she had been wondering that there had been no new developments in that quarter.

'You know, I always park the car in front of the office when I call for telegrams. The Commissioner seems glad to see me; he speaks a bit of English and likes showing it off, I imagine. He had another white man with him, an assistant.'

'Yes. Georges Bodet.'

'Ah, you've met him? I should say the two of them don't hit it off. I've never heard Costemans say a word to the other chap. This morning, as I was driving away, a Frenchwoman signalled to me to stop.'

He seemed quite embarrassed. Evidently the whole business had got on his nerves; it outraged his sense of what was fitting.

'Have you met her too? Rather a common little thing, isn't

she? Well, no sooner had I stopped than she jumped into the car and said, "I've got to speak to you."

For a moment Emilienne forgot all about Lady Makinson's letter, and listened for what was coming.

'She jabbered away so fast that I missed a good deal. But I gathered that she was scared about something – in a blue funk, in fact. All the time she talked she kept on looking towards the office. She began by asking if Ferdinand had come back. When I said "No," she clutched my arm.

"But haven't you any news of him? Can't you say when he'll be back?"

'When I said "No" again, she looked quite desperate. Then she made me drive on twenty yards; she said she was afraid of the two men in the office.

"Do you often see the young lady?" she asked. "Listen! Tell her things are going from bad to worse. She'll know what I mean. They want to force me to go back to France. Georges has even spoken of divorcing me. Tell her I simply don't know what to do, but I won't let myself be driven away like that. If they insist, there's nothing I shall stick at."

Phelps smiled, as if to excuse himself for repeating all this; then added:

'She got so worked up that I thought she was going to throw a fit, or something. Really it was most uncomfortable. Then one of the two Europeans – the assistant fellow – suddenly came up. He didn't say a word. He just stood beside the car and stared at her. She jumped out at once and ran away to one of the bungalows. Really it was like a scene in a mad-house.'

'I suppose I'd better go there tomorrow,' said Emilienne, with a sigh.

'Do you really think it's as serious as she made out?'

'I shouldn't be surprised.'

'And will you try to do something ... ?'

'I don't know.' She rose with a nervousness that was

unusual with her and, after hesitating for some moments, said:

‘Listen, Captain Phelps. Would you very much mind if I ask you to go now? I’d rather like to be alone this evening.’

‘I say, I’m awfully sorry!’ He sprang to his feet. ‘I’d no idea I was boring you.’

‘You weren’t boring me at all, only ... You understand, don’t you?’

‘I think so. Shall I come round tomorrow as usual?’

‘But I shall be going to Niangara.’

‘Then perhaps we’ll meet there?’

‘Very likely. Good night ... You’re forgetting your letter.’

Quite possibly he had left it on purpose, to give her an opportunity of reading it again. But that was unnecessary; she knew by heart the two phrases that concerned her.

‘Camille!’ she called as soon as Phelps was gone.

He came from the kitchen, where he usually gave Baligi a hand in preparing the meal, and he saw at once that something serious had happened.

‘I’m very worried.’ She was pacing up and down the room, twisting her handkerchief between her fingers. ‘An idea has just come to me – it had never entered my head before – and now it’s the only thing about which I’m seriously alarmed. What’s your opinion, Camille? Do you think Ferdinand’s the sort of man who’d kill himself?’

The last words, spoken quite calmly and distinctly, shocked him beyond measure. A shiver ran down his spine, and furiously he touched wood.

‘Why?’ he asked with an effort. ‘Why on earth ...?’

‘Let me tell you something I’ve just learnt. Lady Makinson is at Stamboul, and Phelps has had a letter from her. She says the journey went off without a hitch and she’s feeling rather pleased with herself. What do you make of it?’

He knitted his brows, but said nothing.

‘You see what I’m driving at?’

He nodded.

'During the last two or three days before he left, how did Ferdinand strike you? He was in a very - very emotional state, wasn't he? No, that was a stupid question. He must have been, to act like that.'

'Yes.'

She interrupted the thread of her remarks to say:

'I'm afraid the Bodets are on the brink of doing something silly.' In the same breath she added: 'Of course it's all pure guesswork. He hasn't written to anybody. If his mother had heard anything she'd have wired to me at once.'

For by now a whole fortnight had elapsed without a word from Ferdinand to his family or Emilienne. Lady Makinson did not mention where she had seen the last of him; but presumably this was at Alexandria, for he would not have been allowed to travel by a naval plane.

But supposing he had followed her up by sea? In that case, Lady Makinson might have written her letter before the boat arrived.

Emilienne regretted not having noted the date on the postmark. Still, even without it, by studying the airline timetable, checking dates and hours, might she not glean some information?

'Now leave me alone, please.'

'May I say something first? I've been thinking it over and I'm convinced that Ferdinand is quite incapable of - of doing what you said.'

She looked him in the eyes and saw that he was not quite so certain of this as he professed to be.

'Let's get dinner over quickly,' she said finally. 'Then I'll go to bed early, and tomorrow we'll see...'

'He hates me like poison, don't you understand? I should have noticed that at the start, at Charleroi. What a fool I've been!'

Instead of going first to the office to ascertain if a telegram had come in, Emilienne had stopped her car outside the Bodets' bungalow, yielding to a secret craving to mortify herself and, perhaps, a vague idea that by acting thus she was propitiating Fate.

Yette was wearing the same dressing-gown as before, a hideous ready-made garment in blue crêpe de Chine that flapped about her tiny body as she moved. Her bare feet were in loose slippers, and Emilienne noticed that they were dirty, as indeed was everything in the bungalow.

'Do sit down. Help yourself to a drink if you're feeling thirsty. Afraid I haven't the energy to play the hostess. Last night I slept with a knife under my pillow. I'm pretty sure Georges had a revolver under his. That's what we've come to – after five months' married life!'

There was no need to encourage her to talk. Indeed, Emilienne suspected that when there was no one in the house she kept talking to herself.

'I don't know how you and Ferdinand fixed it up between you, but I'm sure it was quite different from our engagement. I'd gone to Charleroi to spend the holidays with grandma; my mother's Belgian, you know. That was where I met Georges; he was on six months' leave. His parents live two doors off my grandmother's. His father's foreman at a colliery. So he's no reason to put on airs, has he?'

Emilienne couldn't help throwing glances towards the office building, where she knew Phelps would be turning up at any moment, in Major Crosby's car.

'We went to the pictures together several times. I was a good girl then, and Georges can't deny it. If he tried to, I'd only have to remind him of – of certain details. Not very savoury details, either. You know what I mean, don't you? It was he who talked me round, and one afternoon he got me to go with him to a hotel ...

'Hadn't I a perfect right to insist on his marrying me? First

he agreed, then he started trying to back out. He kept on saying that the climate out here wasn't suitable for a white woman. When he took that line I threatened to tell my parents everything.

'I had to go back to Paris, and I wrote to him three times a week to keep him up to the scratch. He was always trying to wriggle out of it, you know.

'And what do you think he's saying to me now? That I've spoilt his life! That his career is wrecked and he may as well put a bullet through his head and have done with it! Did you ever hear such rubbish? ... Don't look at the bungalow, please, I know it's filthy. I don't feel up to cleaning it, or even giving orders to the boy. But I assure you I'm quite good at house-keeping, really'...

'Am I to blame if that Costemans bitch has her knife into me? Would you believe it, yesterday in the bazaar she stalked past me with her head up, pretending not to recognize me!

'I wasn't going to let her get away with it, you bet! I asked her to explain - in the presence of all those niggers. And imagine what she did! She called up a convict, one of the ones they use as policemen out here - crazy, isn't it? - and she told him to take me back to the bungalow.

'Last night Georges wouldn't say a word to me, but I saw him cleaning his revolver and putting six cartridges in it.

'What am I to do? Can you suggest anything?'

Phelps had just driven up. When Emilienne began to make a move, Yette caught her by the arm.

'Do give me some advice! Your father's a lawyer, isn't he? What would you do in my place? Has Georges any right to divorce me?'

'I'll think it over, and let you know in a day or two.' Emilienne was impatient to be gone. 'And try not to worry meanwhile ...'

'Not to worry! That's easier said than done. They've got me in their power, damn them! It seems the Commissioner

can have any woman turned out of the Congo on the pretext that she's damaging European prestige!'

Fortunately just then Phelps, not finding her in the office, had begun to walk towards the bungalow. Emilienne went to meet him.

'Is that all you have to say to me?' wailed Yette; then added angrily: 'I know what it is. You had lunch with that woman, and she's got round you!'

The sight of Phelps bending over Emilienne's hand to kiss it seemed to infuriate her still more, and she retreated into the bungalow, muttering to herself.

'So you came to see her?' Phelps said rather lamely.

'No telegram?'

'Yes - from London.' He made haste to specify whence it came, so as not to rouse false hopes. 'The propeller leaves on Saturday and should be here on Saturday week. I've wired Stanleyville for a mechanic to overhaul the engine. So you won't have to put up with me much longer.'

She checked it up in her mind. He wouldn't be leaving for ten days, and surely some news of Ferdinand would have come through before then.

Camille's way of dogging her steps when she was inspecting the plantation got on her nerves sometimes. With his studiously gentle manner he reminded her of a paid companion to an invalid.

The mechanic turned up three days later, and Phelps had now a good excuse for spending almost all his time at, or near, the bungalow. Between them the two men thoroughly overhauled the machine, and there was some levelling out to be done to ensure a good take-off.

Phelps tried without success to disguise his exultation. Though the bungalow had agreeable associations and in some ways he was reluctant to leave, the prospect of taking the air

again had gone to the young man's head. Perhaps it was less the prospect of the actual flight that excited him than that of landing at the Wellington 'drome and seeing the expression on the faces of those two old worthies, his father and his uncle ...

Next week another letter came from Lady Makinson, to say that she had settled down at Therapia in a big *yali* that had once belonged to a Grand Vizier, and she enclosed a snapshot showing the two children playing in what used to be the harem.

All this was rather a strain for Emilienne, but she put a good face on it and listened amiably to Phelps as he prattled now of Constantinople and the Bosphorus, now of New Zealand and his family.

She had a letter from her father, who informed her that this year he was going to Vittel earlier than usual, so as to be able to join in an August cruise to Spitsbergen, a trip he had been meditating for several years. He 'assumed' that all was going well at the plantation and the wedding would soon take place, and he specially warned his daughter to guard against malaria, quoting the case of an uncle of his who had suffered horribly from it long after his return to Europe.

Madame Graux also had sent a letter:

'I have said nothing about it at home or to your father. In the light of your first letter I can guess the reason for your silence. I sometimes wonder if you would not have done better to follow him up. I make a point of reading all the news from abroad in the daily papers'

To see, presumably, if a Frenchman had committed suicide in Turkey ...

The void was forming, or about to form, on all sides of Emilienne; not only did she hear the roar of the engine on the plane during two successive evenings, but Crosby, too, was making preparations for his annual trip to London.

One morning Macassis drove up to the bungalow and asked for a glass of water; as Emilienne was down at the infirmary

he merely left a message with Camille to say that he was bound for Watsa and would call again in three or four weeks' time.

Nothing at Niangara. Phelps went there now only on alternate days. He had not met Yette again, but her husband was always to be seen in the office, looking more haggard and distracted than ever.

Ferdinand had been away three weeks now, and Lady Makinson back with her family for over a fortnight. Might it not be that her talk of a pleasant journey and the rest of it meant purely and simply that ...? Checking the thought abruptly, she called:

'Camille!'

'Yes, mademoiselle.'

'When Captain Phelps has left ...' She paused. Tensely Camille waited for her to continue. 'I haven't quite decided yet, but I may be going on a short journey.' At once, as much to reassure herself as him, she added: 'I shan't be away very long. I'll just go there and back without stopping anywhere.'

For his last night Phelps slept at the bungalow, sharing Camille's room with Major Crosby, for he wanted to make an early start and, if possible, reach Dar-es-Salaam that afternoon.

He was bubbling over with a rather febrile gaiety, and unable to talk of anything but the impending flight. At one moment, conscious of this, he apologized

'Anyhow, I'll send you a wire.' No sooner had he said it than he realized his blunder and tried to cover it up. 'But I don't suppose it will interest you in the least; by then you'll have had another wire.'

It went off quite simply, without a hitch. They breakfasted in silence, watching the flags set up at various points to show the direction of the wind. Though there was no rain the ground was heavy and the take-off might be difficult.

The mechanic worked up to the last moment. Phelps was

dressed in his ordinary clothes, and all he took with him was a thermos flask of strong tea, sandwiches, chocolate and a few bananas.

As usual, he bent over Emilienne's hand, then at the last moment, after a brief hesitation, drew her to him shyly and kissed her cheeks.

'Good luck!' He said it in so low a tone that she had to guess the words.

The mechanic had spun the propeller, and across the din of the engine Crosby bawled 'Happy landings!'; then, standing to attention, gave Phelps a military salute.

Strangely enough, as after circling above the bungalow the plane headed south-east, it was Camille, and Camille only, who furtively wiped his eyes.

'I'll take the mechanic with me,' said Major Crosby to Emilienne. 'If I can be of help in any way at all, don't hesitate to come and see me. I shan't be leaving for three weeks.'

And, suddenly, Emilienne was alone ...

CHAPTER IX

It was another attempt to steal a march upon Chance; instead of going to Niagara daily as at first, she took to going every other day. Somehow she had got it into her head that the message would be handed her *en route*; in other words, that she would meet a runner with the telegram on the way.

For, though she could have given no reason for the notion, it was a telegram, and nothing else, that she expected. Chance had played a mean trick on her in this respect; her father had had the ill-inspired idea of wiring to her when the cheque was sent to Brussels, the result being that she did meet a runner on the road and, having no small change, gave him a hundred-franc tip.

But on opening the telegram all she read was:

'Documents posted today. Father.'

Two days later, on reaching Niangara, she found the offices closed. So far as she knew, there was no public holiday, and for a moment she felt her mind go blank – a curious sensation that had been coming over her rather frequently in these last weeks. She had not lost confidence, but her confidence was no longer of the active kind that meets destiny half-way. In fact, she was run down, mentally and physically, and inclined to clutch at any straw of hope.

'Let's see. Phelps got his propeller on a Wednesday. So next Wednesday's the day.'

Then, looking back on her past life, she had to admit that Friday had always been her 'lucky day'. Sheer superstition! – and she tried to laugh herself out of it, but half-heartedly.

And now, turning towards the Commissioner's house, she saw a Belgian flag flying half-mast over the portico. Looking up, she saw another flag half-mast above the office.

Her heart missed a beat. In vain she told herself that probably some member of the Royal Family had died in Belgium. Leaving her car on the roadside, she almost ran to the Costemans' bungalow.

For some time no one answered her knock. At last a boy appeared, a youngster who didn't speak a word of French. She tried to explain herself by gestures, but the boy was too stupid, or she too flustered, to make him understand. After some moments he went away; then came back shaking his head. At last a plaintive voice came from the bedroom:

'Go round to the Bodets'. The words were half drowned by a baby's fretful cries.

A fortnight before, Emilienne wouldn't have lost her nerve so easily. Still, there was something really nerve-racking in the atmosphere that morning. It was one of those sweltering, sunless days, with a sky the colour of lead, that Camille called

'Dead Sea days', and the flies were even more aggressive than usual.

There was no one on the Bodets' verandah, and this time she went up the steps without calling for the boy. On reaching the door she saw Costemans sitting in the living-room talking to the white missionary, an old man who one morning when she was driving in had passed her on a motor-cycle.

Costemans rose and came to the door. His face was drawn, but calm; the rings round his eyes darker than ever.

'Do come in,' he said. 'I'm glad to see you, as we shall need your evidence.'

The Father, who had a long reddish-brown beard, merely bowed to her.

'Have you heard what's happened?' Costemans asked.

'I've heard nothing at all. I've just been to your bungalow and your wife told me to come here.'

'Oh, you woke her up!' he exclaimed rather peevishly. 'I'm sorry about that. She didn't sleep a wink last night.'

Suddenly Emilienne opened her mouth, but something told her to repress the cry that rose to her lips. She had just caught sight of a table in the corner on which lay a body covered with a sheet.

'Who?' She brought the word out with an effort.

'Georges Bodet. Please sit down. Can I offer you something to drink? Unfortunately there's no other room to which I can take you ...'

'And Yette?'

'Father Julien says she may pull through. Needless to say, the doctor's out on tour, as usual.'

Costemans seated himself at another table, on which were a pen and ink and some sheets of foolscap. Evidently he had been writing when Emilienne came.

'The tragic event took place yesterday morning. To be more exact, it was yesterday morning **we** heard of it. If I could have got in touch with you I would **have** done so, as

your evidence will be very helpful. But I felt sure you'd be coming in today.'

Father Julien was smoking a huge meerschaum, and Emilienne caught herself wondering if the brown streaks in his beard were not due to nicotine. Contritely she switched her attention back to what the Belgian was saying.

'Bodet didn't come to office at six. At half-past I sent an orderly to his place to fetch him ... It will be simpler if I read the report I have drawn up:

"The body of the deceased Georges Bodet was lying on the floor at the foot of the bed. A 6·35 bore revolver (made by the Heristal Small Arms Factory) lay within reach of his right hand. Henriette Bodet, his wife, lay on the bed, with a bullet wound in her left cheek, and appeared to be *in extremis*.

"The house-boy was away. Searches were made for him, as suspicion naturally fell on him. Yesterday evening he was discovered hiding in the bush; there seems no reason to disbelieve his statement that in his panic at what he had seen he took to flight."

Costemans ceased reading and looked up with a lugubrious expression.

'I wired to Stanleyville at once, as I should have preferred not to take the responsibility of holding the enquiry myself, though I have full magisterial powers. There were special circumstances in this case - you understand what I mean? Anyhow, to avoid possible misunderstandings I have asked Father Julien to be present throughout the enquiry and countersign the depositions.'

Emilienne dared not look towards the table on which the body lay.

'Is Yette in her bedroom?' she asked.

'Yes. You can go to her presently. The bullet went out at the back of her neck. She recovered consciousness last night.'

'Hasn't she said anything?'

The Commissioner seemed not to hear the question.

'My wife tells me she thinks she heard three shots in the course of the night, but, as she did not turn on the light, has no idea what time that was. She assumed that someone was firing at some wild animal; we often hear shots at night. But I've been unable to find the third bullet. Perhaps, after shooting his wife, Bodet's hand trembled and he failed to hit himself the first time, in which case the shot may have gone out by the verandah. Anyhow, there were three shells all right.' He pointed to a small sealed package on the table in front of him. 'I have reason to believe,' he went on in the same toneless voice, 'that the Bodets confided in you to some extent, and I will ask you to make a statement, which I shall take down in writing and require you to sign.'

When Emilienne kept silent, he suggested:

'Perhaps it would make it easier if I put questions to you?'

Father Julien went on puffing at his pipe. Negroes walking by outside stopped talking as they passed the bungalow and shot timid glances through the doorway.

'I'll begin by the obvious question. Did you observe any indications that the Bodets did not get on well together?'

She nodded; then thought better of it, tried to say something but found no words. True, they didn't 'get on', but there was much more to it than that; only - how explain it?

'Did Henriette Bodet tell you that her husband had threatened to kill her?'

Certainly she did. Emilienne nodded again, to get it over, though conscious that these questions travestied the true facts.

'Do you know the cause of their estrangement? Please note that, as Bodet is dead, there's no question of criminal proceedings. This report is being drawn up by me for what I might call moral reasons.'

'I'm afraid I can't help you there,' she sighed. 'All I know is that they didn't hit it off - and they'd reached breaking-point. Now may I go to Yette?'

Father Julien rose and tiptoed into the next room, after

carefully depositing his pipe on a small table. Holding the door ajar, he beckoned to Emilienne.

All she saw on entering was two eyes, eyes whose colour she had never observed before, pale grey flecked with gold, and there was something so harrowing in their fixity that she had to turn away.

For Yette, whose face was entirely swathed in bandages, was gazing at her intently, struggling to convey, it seemed, a message that she could not utter. And, as she gazed, her body moved a little in the bed. The Father stood beside her, and Emilienne, finding no words to answer the entreaty in her eyes, gave way to tears and hid her face in her hands.

'Try to keep calm,' the missionary whispered, touching her shoulder. 'She mustn't be excited in any way.'

She left the room without having said anything, Father Julien explained as the door closed behind them:

'She's been like that since yesterday, and she won't, or can't, speak. Perhaps the shock has deprived her of the power of speech. Anyhow, the doctor will be here tomorrow and we shall know how things are.'

Costemans had something else to say, and he spoke even more stiffly than before, weighing his words.

'I foresee that people will talk about the strained relations between Bodet and myself. As a matter of fact, had I not out of mistaken kindness postponed taking the disciplinary action his conduct called for, this tragedy might perhaps have been averted ... It has been a great shock to my wife and, coming so soon after her *accouchement*, may well have serious consequences for her ...'

There was no telegram, needless to say, and as she drove back along the too familiar road Emilienne felt more tired than ever. It was more than physical fatigue; a sense of utter desolation, all-pervading, like the grey light on earth and sky, had settled on her. She was not suffering, but her body and mind had gone limp, and had the car stopped for lack of petrol she

might well have stayed for hours on the roadside, gazing dully into space. Everything seemed so hopeless; all effort so futile.

She was driving slowly. Suddenly, with a rattle of scrap-iron, Macassis drove past in his ramshackle car, going in the opposite direction. As he passed, the little man leant out, waved his hand to her, and shouted some question that she failed to catch. The last word sounded like:

‘... pleased?’

She shrugged her shoulders. ‘Pleased’ – about what? This was one of the moments that came to her occasionally, when the thought of the monotonous tranquillity of the bungalow filled her with despair and she wondered if she could bring herself to stay there much longer. Nevertheless the idea of going back to Moulins, to her father’s house, seemed equally unbearable.

How strange, she mused, that so many people get through life without once coming up against its tragic side! Her father, for instance. He had remained a child at heart. Was he capable of any really intense, *adult* emotion? Then her thoughts drifted back to her mother, who had died when she was nine; then back again to her father, delighted as a schoolboy with a long-awaited treat in prospect – the cruise to Spitsbergen.

‘Documents posted to-day. Father.’

Even when she told him she was leaving at once, he hadn’t said a word. Then suddenly a picture rose before her of his quaint, lopsided face, and she seemed to hear his voice uttering one of those kindly, commonplace remarks which were always on his lips – and a rush of emotion came over her.

‘Poor father!’ she said aloud, and slowed down still more.

But all the time, with an unconscious eagerness, she was watching for the dead tree, the first landmark, after which came, a little farther on, the group of three huts and a banana grove; and, finally, a chimney-top showing above the green sea of the bush.

As usual, she drove the car into the garage and locked the

door. Then in the failing light she looked round for Camille and saw him still at work on the distant hillside, with a gang of natives and an elephant.

She was really done in, aching in every limb. To keep herself from brooding she had been overtaxing her strength, and now was feeling the effects.

Tossing her sun-helmet on to a table, she sank into a long chair and settled down to muse for half an hour or so in the gathering shadows.

Suddenly her eyes fixed themselves on an object just in front of her, and she sat bolt upright.

The odd thing was that for some moments she had been looking at that hat without really seeing it – never realizing that it was Ferdinand's double *terai*. Her pupils dilated. She rose to her feet, half dreading that her eyes had deceived her, or that by some cruel trick of chance it was a spare hat that Baligi had left lying there after cleaning out a cupboard.

Just then there was a sound outside, the door opened, and she saw Ferdinand coming towards her – a Ferdinand that she had so far seen only in photographs, in shorts and a bush jacket.

'Hullo, Emilienne!'

She realized that he was acutely nervous, though he gave no sign of it; but just then her senses were strung up to a preternatural lucidity. In a flash she had sensed everything: Ferdinand's panic fear; the reason why the hat had been placed there, not thoughtlessly but as an intimation; the effort it cost him to speak in that studiously calm voice, and to approach her as he now was doing, with deliberately measured steps.

'Good evening, Ferdinand.' How she got the words out she hardly knew.

And then, strangely enough, they kissed each other almost in the usual way, quite naturally, for all the riot of emotions in their hearts.

Emilienne thought quickly: 'Everything depends on this.'

By 'this' she meant the present moment, the first words they said, the first time their eyes met – for both were still so nervous that they dared not face up to each other and kept on gazing round the room.

It was no accident that Camille had worked late in the plantation, or that he was starting back now and would be at the bungalow within five minutes.

'Is Yette out of danger?' Ferdinand asked.

'What! You *know*? I have you been to Niangara?'

'No, the natives told me what had happened.'

She had forgotten about the 'bush telegraph', the promptitude with which messages are put through by tom-tom, sometimes faster than by the white man's Morse.

'I understand now!' she exclaimed.

'What?'

'Oh ... nothing.'

What she had understood was the remark Macassis flung to her as he drove past. '... pleased?' He'd assumed she knew already of the great event, Ferdinand's home-coming, heralded by the tom-toms.

With a faint, vaguely apologetic smile, she let herself sink back into the chair.

'Tired?'

'That doesn't matter – now. Sure you're not ...?' After a moment's hesitation she came out with it, rather shyly: 'Sure you're not vexed with me?'

Why he should be vexed with her she hardly knew. Perhaps for having come here unannounced. For everything ...

He appeared not to notice the question. All he said was:

'The plane had a break-down, you know.'

That was so. Something had gone wrong with the engine between Malakal and Juba, and they had been held up for twenty-four hours. But from the way he spoke it almost seemed that he meant the break-down to explain his three weeks' absence.

Camille entered, as usual without knocking, and reported in his most businesslike tone:

'I've put forty men on to clearing Plot 3. And I've just had Mali taken to the infirmary. He's developed a temperature poor old chap.'

All three were, so to speak, walking a tight-rope, acutely conscious that the least imprudence might mean disaster. The great thing was to go on talking and behaving as if this evening were like any other evening: to avoid showing any sign of nervousness.

Emilienne was convinced that Ferdinand had grown thinner. At the beginning of the meal, which was served by Baligi's mother, as Baligi herself was ill, it struck her that there was some other change in his appearance; but, until she saw his spectacles on the table-cloth beside his plate, she did not realize why he looked so different.

'Camille's shown me the copies of the agreement sent to Brussels. It's very satisfactory. And you've done wonders with the infirmary.'

'Well, I was rather worried about one thing: whether to put in a third window or not.' She tried to smile. 'Then it struck me that the sun would shine straight in by it at three in the afternoon, the worst hour of the day.'

'You're absolutely right. One's apt to think of things like that too late, and, out here, it's just these things that have the most importance.'

It almost seemed as if there were a double meaning in the words: 'Out here, it's just these things that have the most importance.'

'I thought of having a footbridge thrown across the river, Emilienne said, encouraged by his approval. 'It would save the trouble of going round by the waterfall to cross, and the men would gain a quarter of an hour each time they go to the hill.'

Only another hour or so had to be got through before bed time. And to-morrow - well, somehow both had an impression

that things would go more easily next day; time was on their side. When at one moment there came an embarrassed silence it was Camille who came to the rescue. Turning to Ferdinand, he said:

'To-morrow's pay-day. Shall we look through the pay-roll now? There's some changes to be made. Orders have come in from Niagara to pay forty centimes a day instead of thirty.'

'Yes, bring the pay-roll, please.'

He put on his glasses, and with a smile to Emilienne asked:

'Feeling sleepy, aren't you?'

'A bit.'

'Then I suggest you go to bed right away. Of course you'll keep the room you're in. I'll sleep in Camille's.'

For all his rather self-assured manner he was feeling far from at his ease; indeed, he hardly dared to kiss Emilienne's cheek as he said 'Good night' to her at her door.

'Sleep well.'

But he knew she wouldn't sleep - anyhow, not for an hour or two. He knew that once she was in the room her eyes would fall on a little pile of sheets of airmail paper lying on the blotter on the writing-desk and seeming to have been left there by oversight.

She realized at once that he had put them there deliberately, and that at this moment he was far more preoccupied with her reactions to them than with the pay-roll.

These diary-entries were exactly like those he sent to his mother by every mail, and which she showed to Emilienne. Or, rather, there was only one difference - a long gap after the first entry, dated May 25 and consisting of a single line:

'There's nothing for it!'

On resuming the diary eight days later he showed the gap by a wavy vertical line.

'June 2. This morning I saw her children accompanied by a nurse-maid walking in a big public garden rather like one of our Paris

squares. The small boy is the image of his mother – so much so, indeed, that I can hardly imagine him growing up to be a man!

'Somehow I can't get used to the idea ... Only six days ago we were at Khartum, and at Khartum everything was settled – irrevocably. My last chance!'

During the flight Lady Makinson had pretended not to know Ferdinand – which was easy enough, as she was always surrounded by the English passengers, who, impressed by her personality, lavished attentions on her. It was she who presided at meals at the various halts; she for whom take-offs were delayed if she was slow to make a move.

Watching from his corner seat, Ferdinand had guessed why she talked so volubly, why her laugh was unnaturally shrill and she smoked even more persistently than usual.

'Probably at that moment, if I'd chosen ...'

But at that moment his brain was fogged; he had no clear idea what he wanted. All he knew was that he was urged on by a blind impulse to do something – no matter what – but at all costs to break irrevocably with the past.

'Did it ever occur to her, when she shot glances at me across the full length of the cabin, that there were times when I'd good as decided to kill her and, after her, myself?'

Of that crucial moment at Khartum he had set little down in the diary. Dinner was over. The other passengers were settling down to bridge. For some reason – perhaps to calm her nerves – Lady Makinson had walked out on to the terrace, from which tables and chairs had been removed, as a sandstorm was approaching.

'At that moment I realized that a man in certain moods is capable of – anything! Such a loose term as "brain-storm" doesn't meet the case; there's more to it than that. I'd made up my mind to ... no, I can't remember. Perhaps to throw myself at her feet and weep my

heart out – or something equally preposterous! Did she guess this? Was she touched by pity? She watched me coming towards her, and I saw her fist clench suddenly, and go quite white, as if she were digging her nails into the palm of her hand. Then very softly, imploringly, she whispered:

“Please ...”

‘Just that one word. And I knew what she meant. She was begging me not to say the word, or make the gesture that might have – changed everything.

‘Yes, at that moment, if I’d chosen ...

‘But I let the moment pass. And half an hour later I saw her writing a telegram in the hotel office. I understood when we reached Alexandria, where a hydroplane was waiting for her.

‘I don’t know why I took the boat. I suppose – I had to!’

Bending over the pay-roll, the two men kept silence, listening. The only light came from a small lamp on the table. They could hear the steady drumming of the rain upon the roof; as usual at this season, a downpour had set in with the nightfall. Looking across the table, Ferdinand could see Camille’s eyes fixed on him anxiously.

‘She can’t have read it all yet,’ he murmured.

He felt sure of that, for he was timing mentally the progress of her reading.

‘June 5. I wonder what would happen had I not an instinctive repugnance for losing my mental balance – had I the temperament of a man like Bodet, for instance? And I wonder, too, what it was that really prompted me to come here, to Stamboul?’

‘At the time I thought that I was being driven by Fate, urged on unescapably towards some tragic issue, in the style of a Greek drama! Yes, I had sometimes the most melodramatic ideas – of a wholesale killing, for example!’

‘Another fancy of mine was that I could go on trailing after her indefinitely, obliging her to repeat day after day, that half-pathetic “Please ... !”’

The next day's entry consisted of only two words, written in a steadier hand.

'Romantic folly!'

Three unrecorded days. Then:

'June 9. Saw her this morning in her husband's car. She didn't notice me, I think. But – I have been convinced of it since that brief contact on the terrace at Khartum – I know that she, too, was tempted ... for a moment.' After which he had written again, in a gust of anger with himself: *'Romantic folly!'*

To which he added, as a sort of postscript:

'Her son is a really beautiful child. Tomorrow she is entertaining the diplomatic corps to tea. If good old Camille could see me now ...! And Tom Thumb! When he's out of sorts he tries to slink away to the jungle to hide. I'm a sick animal myself. Dirty and dragged. I've given up shaving. I can see the hotel staff are worried about me; do they fear I may do something desperate?

'Even the saints and heroes of the past must, on occasion, have been sick animals, must have smelt bad and had thoughts for which they blushed when they got well again.

'Yet there's something almost voluptuous about it. I do absolutely nothing. Yesterday I spent quite half an hour amongst a group of street-loafers staring at two cars that had collided; and it was quite an effort to switch back my mind to her!

'June 14. What happened at the plantation – I mean, of course, what passed between us two – is growing blurred, and I can look back on it dispassionately. A vast relief. I can even smile at a certain grotesque detail, the first time – due to her injured knee.

'Still, I can't eradicate that "Please ...!" I keep on trying to recall the exact tone in which she said it, the hot smell of the approaching sandstorm.

'Damned fool that I am!

'June 15. No, not damned fool. Damned mountebank. This morning

I felt like shaving and deliberately refrained After that I prowled round her house in the hope she might see me. Why? Yesterday she dined at the Polish Embassy and the papers say she wore a tiara ... It's to be feared the animal is still a little sick

'June 16 Am beginning to believe that Sir Ronald is right, after all Poor Mary, she can't do without her cigarettes and opium, her mad rushes to and fro about the globe I actually shaved this morning But I think I'll do a "cure" at Cairo before returning Am still a trifle afraid of the loneliness of the bungalow, and a possible relapse.

'Sad, but true, the romantic attitude is a fool's game, a piece of silly make-believe Or else one has no business to start plantations, build roads and bridges, and treat man as a rational being

'Cairo, June 19 The sick animal is on the mend "Got off" with a woman of the street, but it was a dismal failure. I felt more like weeping! I wonder if, when I meet Emilienne ... ?

'June 21 The animal is cured! Sound in mind and limb - and heart! Have booked my passage on Imperial Airways. "Life is earnest!"'

'Camille! Did you hear something?'

'Yes, that was the mattress creaking She's gone to bed'

'But the light's still on'

But no sooner had he said it than the gleam of light under the door died out

'Good night, Camille'

'Good night'

At eight in the morning he came back from the plantation for breakfast, and his face lit up when he saw Emilienne in a white dress, flowers on the table, and Camille laughing and chattering away in the best of spirits

All the doors stood open, including those of Emilienne's bedroom and the kitchen, and the level morning light was flooding the red tiled floor, seeping under the bookcases and cupboards

'Had a good night?' he asked

'Fairly good. I woke up twice, thinking about poor Yette.'

He sat down and, unthinkingly, leaned his elbows on the table. From his place he could see the writing-desk in the bedroom; the diary sheets were gone.

'Ferdinand!'

'Yes?'

'Don't you think we should go to Niagara and see if we can do anything for her? Yesterday I felt quite ashamed leaving her like that, but somehow I didn't feel up to staying.'

'We'll go there after breakfast ... By the way, I see we have two cars now.'

They fell to discussing whether it would be wiser to sell one of the cars or to keep both. Several times Ferdinand's eye strayed towards the place where the diary sheets had been.

'Oh, by the way,' Emilienne said, reddening, 'Just now when I was doing out my room, I threw some sheets of paper into the fire, without thinking.'

'Yes ... I understand ...'

And abruptly he rose and, despite Camille's presence, took Emilienne in his arms, letting his head sink on her shoulder.

'Oh, Ferdinand! What's come over you?'

'Nothing ... Please don't speak ...'

His spectacles had slipped off, and somehow he didn't wait for her to see him without them – not at this moment. He drew a deep breath, then said:

'Yes, dear, we'll go to Niagara.'

He said it so gravely that she couldn't help smiling. From his tone one might have thought he was making a profession of faith, or announcing a decision of capital importance.

'We'll go to Niagara.'

And really she did wrong to smile, for that day 'Niagara' meant, above all else, the bearded missionary with the meek schaum.

THE BRETON SISTERS

CHAPTER I

THERE were too many turnings, and the hills, though never long, were uncomfortably steep. And there was also, and above all, that awkward business of the fifty francs, about which he positively had to come to some decision before he reached Concarneau.

The trouble with Jules Guerec, as he sat crouching over the wheel, peering into the darkness, every muscle tense, was that under such conditions he couldn't fix his mind on anything for five consecutive minutes. No sooner had an idea occurred to him than another jostled it aside.

It was the first time he'd driven the car after dark, and he found the glare of his headlights on the road most bewildering. For one thing, they made familiar objects look quite different; not only the road and hedgerows, but the people who passed. The whole visible world had changed out of recognition. For instance, just as he turned the last corner, there had loomed up, bathed in a greenish-yellow sheen, a farm-cart, two sturdy horses, a farmer walking beside them, whip in hand. And suddenly this perfectly ordinary sight had become phantasmagoric, like something seen in a nightmare.

Another reason why the headlights made him nervous was that every time another vehicle approached it was up to him to dim them, and he always had a tendency to turn the knob too far and plunge himself in total darkness.

Also, between Quimper and Concarneau there plies a dreadful dragon of a motor-bus that devours at least one private car a week. And Guérec counted the minutes, wondering if he

would have reached the end of the hairpin bends before encountering it.

How, under such circumstances, could he give his mind to those fifty francs? He might say – what? That he'd met friends and stood a round of drinks? But his sisters knew quite well that one doesn't spend as much as that on drinks for five or six people.

Another trouble was that he'd forgotten all about the skeins of black wool that Françoise had asked him to buy for her at Quimper.

At every moment he was expecting to hear the rumble of the dreaded bus. Though he craned his head forward till his forehead almost touched the windscreen it was no help whatever, and indeed made his steering even more erratic. What would happen if the engine stopped suddenly – as it had a trick of doing – half-way up or down a hill?

Ruefully he admitted it; he had brought all this upon himself. Why had he been so foolish as to dawdle in the streets of Quimper for a good hour and a half instead of starting back at once, with plenty of daylight in hand?

He had put on his best blue jersey, had a shave at the barber's – the man had been so lavish with the powder that there were still traces of it under his ears – and he had donned the cap with a black silk ribbon that showed he was no mere fisherman but skipper-owner of a fishing-boat.

Then he had attended the meeting of the Shipowners' Federation, as representative of the tunny fishing-fleet of Concarneau. This year they had held their meeting early; it was only November, and the tunny season would not begin till the early spring. But during the previous season they had had endless trouble with the canning factories, so they were taking their precautions this year and having the contracts revised before the fishing-fleet put out to sea.

The meeting ended at three, so there was nothing to prevent Jules Guérec from getting back to Concarneau before

nightfall. But only too well he knew he wouldn't manage it. Every time he came to Quimper it was the same thing; all his good resolutions went up in smoke. He knew his steps would turn, inevitably, towards a certain street where at almost any hour of the day two or three girls from Paris were to be seen slowly promenading up and down and ogling every likely male.

The usual thing had happened. Never was he satisfied with what came his way, and he walked up and down the street a dozen times, unable to bring himself to go and look elsewhere – only to accost finally, with awkward eagerness, the first girl he'd set eyes on.

That was why he had to have some explanation handy when that evening his sisters fell to making up their accounts.

To make things worse, a drizzle set in just as the motor-bus appeared round a bend. It was a near thing, but he managed to pass it without mishap. But the experience left him badly rattled and he could feel his nerves on edge. As he drove through Rosporden he was dreading the long hill that leads down to Concarneau – and, on a sudden impulse, touched wood!

Really he had no clear idea of what happened after that. He was still worrying how to account for the fifty francs ... What about saying that he'd paid his subscription to the Federation in advance?

The car was beginning to descend the hill, and the town showed as a crazy diagram in lines of light spread out under his eyes. Just before reaching the Quai de l'Aiguillon he turned left, as he had to drive right round the harbour, which lay between him and his home.

He had a brief glimpse of the tunny-fleet made fast side by side, forming a solid block of white within the darkness, and above it, etched upon the sky, a spider's web of yard-arms, shrouds, and topping-lifts.

He turned into a road bordered by cottages. Rain was glittering down before his headlights, and there was nobody

about. The front wheels churned through puddles, flicking mud on to the windscreen.

Suddenly something moved on his right, and some unaccountable instinct made Guérec press his accelerator. The form of a child showed up in the gloom, for a split second a little face flashed white in the beam of a headlight; then came a soft, squelchy thud.

The car sped on with a slight jolt and, thinking perhaps that he was putting on the brakes, Guérec pressed still harder on the accelerator.

There had been no cry; only that shock, an impression of something falling, a faint creak of the springs as the car passed over it. He dared not look round or make any movement. His legs had gone limp, his breath came in noisy gasps.

The boy – Guérec felt sure it was a schoolboy coming home from school with a satchel under his arm – had streaked across the road like a hare.

Was he still lying, a small crumpled heap, where he had fallen? Guérec was horribly afraid, and his one desire was to escape. He knew it was his duty to turn back, but he couldn't do so – if only because the street was too narrow for an inexperienced driver like himself to turn in.

He drove on, past the turning, to a place where the road was in almost complete darkness, just beside a shipyard where, as it happened, he was having a boat built. Here he stopped, turned up a little side street, halted again, and put his car into reverse.

It couldn't be helped. He *must* go back. He'd explain ... He had no notion what he was going to say – but it must be done.

He forgot to change into top speed and couldn't understand why the engine was making so much noise. As he approached the street where the accident had taken place he was surprised to see it so brightly lit. On entering it he saw the reason; almost every door stood open and light was pouring out on

to the roadway. People were standing in twos and threes on doorsteps, all looking in the same direction. In front of one of the cottages there was a large group talking excitedly and gesticulating, but nothing now lay on the road.

Obviously the injured child had been carried into that small white house, in which a woman could be heard screaming. Guérec did not stop, but drove on as if he had noticed nothing. When he was back at the Quai de l'Aiguillon he started up the hill in the direction of Quimper.

Now and again he had an impulse to turn back and find out exactly what had happened to the child. But it was too late to think of that, and he began to consider his own position.

The first time no one had seen him, for the street was empty; and when he came back the chances were that he hadn't been recognized, as everyone was too excited about the accident to pay attention to a passing car. He must take care not to reach home too early; indeed, it would be prudent to show himself somewhere else first, and accordingly he drove back to Rosborden and halted outside the Station Café.

Some farmers were drinking brandy, and he too ordered a glass of brandy and stood beside the stove, rubbing his hands.

'What a vile road, with all those turnings!' he remarked, but without looking at anyone in particular.

'Come from Quimper?' someone asked.

'Yes.'

That was enough. A word he'd rarely used, the word 'alibi', came to his mind, and there was something comforting about it. All the same, he felt extremely anxious as he got back into his car; he didn't trust his driving and was afraid of having another accident on the way home. He had obtained his driving-licence only a week before, and hitherto one of his sisters had always sat beside him. Though none of them knew how to drive, it gave him confidence to have someone with him.

When he drove down that street of evil memory once more

there were only two or three doors open, but he noticed two bicycles propped against the wall of the white cottage - gendarmes' bicycles, he supposed. He drove past it slowly, so as not to attract attention, came safely to the church of his parish and turned down the hill, a very steep one, that led to the water-front, just opposite the harbour entrance.

This hill was his bugbear, for there was no parapet between the bottom of it and the water, and he always had an impression his brakes would fail or he would press his foot on the accelerator by mistake. His house was the last but one, and, as usual, there were lights in the windows. As he stepped from the car to open the door of the garage, a converted stable, he saw one of his sisters, Céline, come to the window. She was wearing her black Breton costume and white lace cap. And he had no explanation ready about the fifty francs, not to mention the commission he'd forgotten!

After putting the car in the garage he halted on the threshold and asked himself if he had remembered to switch off the current, close the petrol feed, and so on. Then slowly he swung to the heavy door.

As he entered the shop the bell tinkled, just as it used to before he was born, forty years ago, in his parents' time. And the wainscoting of pale, polished pine, like the interior wood work of a well-kept ship, had seen half a century through. So had the well-waxed tables, the linoleum-covered counter, the glazed cupboard containing bottles of spirits and liqueurs.

The smell, too, was exactly the same, a mingled smell of tar and hemp, of coffee, cinnamon and brandy. It was neither a café nor a grocer's. True, drinks were served, but merely thirsty souls were not welcome at the Guérecs' shop, which specialized in the sale of ships' stores, pulleys, nets, and the like.

His sisters, Céline and Françoise, were busy with their needlework at one of the tables.

'Evening!' said Jules Guérec, as he took off his cap. 'Sorry to be so late.'

It was Céline, the more intelligent and younger of the two - she was only forty-one - who promptly scented something wrong. To start with, noticing his empty hands, she remarked:

‘I see you’ve forgotten the wool.’

‘Sorry - yes. The meeting lasted much longer than usual and -’

‘What’s wrong with you?’

An explanation must be given at once or there’d be no peace till Céline had wormed the truth out of him. He had a sudden inspiration.

‘A dreadful thing has happened! I’ve lost my wallet.’

But he wasn’t out of the wood yet; the wallet was in his pocket, and Céline was quite capable of having him take off his coat and rummaging in his pockets. Not that she’d suspect anything, but she knew him to be absent-minded.

‘How do you think you lost it?’

‘Haven’t an idea! I only noticed just now that it wasn’t in my pocket. I may have left it on a table at the *Café Jean*. I’ll go and ring them up.’

He hurried to the street door. The Guérecs had no telephone; the nearest was in a café a hundred yards up the street, opposite the church. As he trudged up the hill he was wondering how to get rid of his wallet.

So absorbed was he with this problem that he completely forgot about the accident. The obvious thing was to drop the wallet into the harbour, weighted with a stone. But to get down to the harbour he’d have to pass the house. Patting the breast-pocket in which the wallet was, he glanced back at its lighted windows, and almost fancied he saw Céline watching at one of them.

Anyhow, the first thing to do was to put through his telephone-call. Standing in the stuffy little call-box at the far end of the tap-room, which was as usual crowded with fishermen, he thought out what to say, and noticed that his voice had a curious ring when he started speaking.

‘Hullo! Is that the *Café Jean*? Jules Guérec speaking. Yes, Guérec of Concarneau. I lost my wallet this afternoon at Quimper and I wonder if ...?’

Someone went to look for it in the public room. Through the glazed door of the call-box he gazed idly at the men drinking round the bar.

‘Very sorry. We can’t see it anywhere.’

As it was too risky going down to the harbour there was only one solution. Rather ridiculous, and unconvincing, as he was only a few steps from his home. Pressing his hand to his stomach and making a wry face, he went almost at a run across the yard to a small wooden hut at its far end.

When he came back his nerves were rather steadier.

‘I’ll pay you tomorrow for the call. I forgot to bring money with me.’

It was really too absurd! He’d had to throw away not merely the wallet but its contents; amongst other things, his car- and driving-licence and two receipted bills. As he walked slowly back, letting the cool air fan his cheeks, it struck him that he’d forgotten to look at the front of the car to see there weren’t any traces ...

The bell tinkled. Françoise started laying the table for dinner in the back room, the door between which and the shop and café always stood open.

‘Any luck?’

‘No, they haven’t found it.’ Reddening a little, he added: ‘But they’re going to have another look.’

‘Did the car run all right?’

‘That reminds me. I must go and see if I turned off the petrol.’

He hurried out to the garage and, keeping an eye on the door to make sure no one was watching, struck a match and proceeded to examine carefully the radiator, wheels and mud-guards. It was a second-hand car, his sisters’ choice, and the body had been repainted by its previous owner so unskillfully

that, whatever polishes one used and however hard one rubbed, there was no getting a gloss on it.

To Guérec's relief there was no mark of any kind, not a scratch. And – thank heaven! – not what he had feared most: not a trace of blood.

‘Well?’

‘Oh, I’d turned it off all right.’

‘We’ll have to make a report to the police. But you won’t have to go out again. Émile will be here presently and he’ll do the needful.’

A big stove was roaring away in the centre of the shop, and Guérec felt uncomfortably hot.

‘Aren’t you going to change?’

When at home he never kept on his best clothes, and with an effort he started up to his bedroom. The stairs creaked as they always had done as long as he could remember. His bedroom had been repapered two years previously, but the paper was of the same bluish shade as before; Céline had vetoed pink as unsuitable for a man’s room.

The looking-glass over the fireplace was in such a state that it made his face appear lopsided; indeed, when he was small he had quite believed his nose was crooked.

Those fifty francs ... No, damn it, it wasn’t of the money he should be thinking now, but of that poor kid! Was he ...? No. He mustn’t utter that word, not even think it ... It was the left-hand wheels that had lifted, the side on which he, Guérec, was sitting.

So Émile – Émile Gloaguen – was coming ... Guérec undressed without realizing what he was doing, and got into a flannel shirt with the collar attached, and his everyday clothes.

Really it was too absurd! It didn’t bear thinking about. Probably no one would believe it, but never, never for a moment, had he seriously intended to bolt like that. The truth was that, owing to the narrowness of the street and his

inexpertness as a driver, he hadn't been able to turn at once. And when he did come back and saw all those people on their doorsteps, he'd lost his nerve. Not so much because he was afraid of owning up as because he couldn't bear the idea of having to see the boy.

Nobody he knew lived in that street. No, that was wrong. Didn't his engineer live in one of that row of cottages, perhaps the third or fourth after *the* one?

He heard the door bell tinkle. The bell always gave exact information of what was happening below: a shrill note when the door opened, a deeper, lingering one when it closed. If there was a long interval between the two it meant that several people had come in, or that the caller – a beggar, perhaps – had waited on the doorstep

'Jules!'

'Yes?'

'Émile's come.'

'Right. I'll be down in a jiffy.'

Somehow he didn't cotton to the man; couldn't stand his face for one thing. In fact, once, when at sea, he'd said to a member of his crew:

'That fellow Gloaguen has a rat's face.'

He felt quite safe in saying it, he knew it wouldn't be repeated. Life's so different on board ship from what it is ashore.

He had three sisters, all older than himself. One of them was married, and, strangely enough she was not the youngest

The eldest was Françoise, who must be getting on for fifty, though, in spite of some faint wrinkles and a few strands of grey in the coils of dark hair bunched on her neck, she didn't look anything like that age. It was she who did most of the housework – the cooking, for instance, and the spring cleaning when no charwoman was available.

The youngest, Celine, was always very spick-and-span and reminded one of an engraving in a book of Breton costumes

She kept the accounts, dealt with wholesalers, and interviewed important customers.

It had come as a bolt from the blue when Marthe, the middle sister, got married two years before. Since then she had given up wearing the Breton costume, and changed in other ways; for one thing, she looked younger. She visited the shop almost every day and spent some hours knitting with her sisters, and twice a week she and her husband came to dinner.

This was one of the dinner evenings – Guérec had only just remembered it. And that smug, rat-faced brother-in-law of his was waiting downstairs ...

Quite possibly Émile had heard about it already, for he was employed at the Central Police Station and was the Superintendent's right-hand man. He was a fair, thin, middle-aged man, with a face the colour of parchment and very white hands. He always wore striped trousers, a black coat, gold-rimmed glasses.

When Guérec came down he found him in the dining-room; for Émile made a point of never sitting down in the 'big room' to which the public had access. They had always referred to it by that name, even in his parents' time, as it was neither a tap-room, nor a restaurant, nor a grocer's, but a combination of all three.

Two water-colours, depicting the two fishing-boats now owned by the Guérecs, the *Françoise* and the *Céline*, hung on one of the dining-room walls.

The *Françoise*, of course, was the older of the two. By rights the next boat they had acquired should have been the *Marthe*, but for some reason never specified she was baptized *Céline*.

However, Marthe was not to be left out; a third boat was on the stocks, as, owing to unemployment and the trade depression, building was relatively cheap. One day, no doubt, the tunny market would look up again, and a third boat come in useful.

'Hullo, Émile? How's things your end?'

'Not too bad. Plenty of work – and responsibility, needless to say.'

Gloaguen delighted in responsibility.

Guérec kissed his sister, who for some weeks had been looking paler than usual; Céline had told him she wouldn't be surprised if 'a great event' in the family were on the way.

'Been to Quimper, Jules?'

'Yes,' Françoise cut in. 'And he managed to lose his wallet there.'

Guérec looked away; the Rat (he always thought of Gloaguen under this name), as the Police Superintendent's factotum, must know all about those peripatetic Parisiennes who to himself, Guérec, seemed such mysterious beings. For instance, how did they manage to look so smart, though simply dressed, and almost always to have such charming manners – not a bit like his idea of 'tarts'?

The table was laid, with the big white soup-tureen plumb in the middle. Françoise could be heard bustling about the kitchen, where onions were sizzling in a pan.

'I'll ring them up about it tomorrow morning,' Gloaguen promised.

'I've just called the *Café Jean*.'

'You didn't go anywhere else?'

'Nowhere.'

'I've just thought of it,' Céline exclaimed. 'Quite likely you dropped your wallet in the car. I'll go and have a look.'

Taking the electric torch which lay on the sideboard, she left the room, and Guérec began to feel nervous again. Mightn't she discover something he'd overlooked?

'Getting your boats ready for the inshore fishing?' Gloaguen asked.

'I haven't decided yet. I'm waiting to see if Malou goes on with it.'

Malou was another skipper, who had one tunny-boat only. To keep it in use during the winter, pending the opening of

the deep-sea season, he had put out for an inshore fishing cruise the previous week. Formerly this was done as a matter of course, especially by owners of boats fitted with auxiliary engines. But in the prevailing depression was it worth while?

'I hear he sold his congers at two francs a pound and the soles fetched only fifteen francs, and he was left with a hundredweight of skates on his hands.'

Émile was smoking. Guérec never smoked, as his sisters, from his youth up, had vetoed it. For the same reason he never drank any spirits in their presence.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, had a remarkably fresh complexion, dark hair, and mild, good-natured eyes. When changing on his return from Quimper he had taken off his shoes and put on black-varnished clogs, and in his present get-up felt much more comfortable than in his best clothes.

Suddenly he gave a start, as if somebody had tapped him on the shoulder. It was no use his trying to keep his mind on other subjects; always that thought came back to him, and for a moment he felt like asking his brother-in-law if he'd heard anything ... That boy might be the son of somebody he knew – his engineer, for instance.

'Dinner's ready,' Françoise announced as she entered and started filling the soup-tureen. 'Hullo! Where's Céline got to?'

As she spoke Céline came in, switching off the torch.

'It's not there. It may have fallen out when you were opening the door. Did you stop anywhere on the way?'

'Why, yes!' He'd forgotten; he should have said 'No.'

'Where?'

'At the Station Café, at Rosporden.'

'Why did you stop there?'

He hadn't to think; it came to him at once.

'Oh, I thought my radiator was boiling. I stopped outside the café in case it needed water.'

'What did you drink?' Céline asked sharply.

‘Only a glass of beer.’

Nobody showed surprise. Céline was like that with her brother.

Could he have killed the child? Suddenly Guérec felt ashamed of himself – of being seated comfortably at table, watching Marthe ladle out a steaming plateful of soup and hand it to him, while that poor child – He lowered his eyes. If the boy was injured it was almost worse, for that meant he was suffering. A picture rose before him of the mother bent above her child, who gazed up piteously at the grown ups, wondering why they didn’t stop his pain while the doctor looked anxious and a smell of medicine hung in the air.

‘So I’ve ordered a brown coat with a fur collar. The dress maker advised sealskin, but Émile thinks musquash goes better with brown

‘Will it cost a lot?’

Guérec hardly listened, hardly saw the faces bent over the plates, and Émile, who had a small reddish moustache, wiping it after every mouthful.

Only once in his life had he gone shooting, and that was because some friends of his had insisted on his coming with them and lent him a gun. He had taken a shot at a rabbit, and to his vast surprise saw it spin like a catherine-wheel in the air, then fall down on its back, lashing out with its paws as it fighting off an unseen foe.

The other guns were some way off, there was no one to whom to turn. And then Guérec had gone through one of the most unpleasant experiences of his life, until tonight. He had no idea what to do. He couldn’t bear to see the wretched little animal in agony, could hardly bring himself to approach it.

He had seen sportsmen finish off a wounded rabbit by wringing its neck, but that solution was more than he could face. With an effort he stepped forward and fired another shot, almost point-blank

But the animal wouldn't die; its paws still beat the air with little jerks. Guérec put in another cartridge and fired again.

Everyone had laughed, for when the rabbit was picked up, practically the whole head was blown away.

But why should that memory be so disturbing? Didn't he kill thousands of fishes every year? Sometimes even, to gain time, the fish were gutted while still alive.

'A little more soup? There's only an omelette to follow, and some cheese.'

'I know,' said Marthe.

Of course she knew. Hadn't she lived in this house for forty years? But this did not prevent her sisters from treating her, after her marriage, like a guest and putting on their best society manners.

'What's wrong with you, Jules?'

'Oh, nothing!'

'Well, you're looking very flushed. Sure you haven't caught a chill?'

As usual, the bell tinkled. It had been like that for years and years. Invariably, no sooner had the family settled down to a meal than someone came: a fisherman's wife, perhaps, to buy a quart of paraffin, or the ferryman for a glass of beer, or, not infrequently, someone in a car who had missed the turning to the residential quarter and, finding himself on a steep hill leading down to the water-front, called in apologetically to ask the way.

The sisters took it in turn to answer the bell on these occasions, and Céline made a point of being almost rude to customers who called at such an untimely hour.

'Couldn't you buy your paraffin at some other time, when we're not at dinner? Now I shall have to go to the kitchen to wash my hands.'

And, duly abashed, the fisherman's wife would take back her bottle wrapped in greasy newspaper, and retreat, murmuring excuses. That was because the Guérec sisters were superior

people, and looked up to in the town; also because, during the tunny-fishing season, it was they who selected the crews for their two boats.

All three had had a convent education. Only Françoise, the eldest, had cut it short, as her parents at that period had only a part share in a fishing-boat. Céline, however, had not left the convent-school till she was eighteen; and there was a piano in the dining-room.

‘Have you a lot of work just now at the police station?’ Guérec kept his eyes fixed on the table-cloth as he spoke.

‘Yes, we’re exceedingly busy. I was almost afraid I shouldn’t be able to come to-night. At the last minute a report of an accident came in; a boy had been knocked down. I told the sergeant to open an enquiry.’

‘What sort of accident?’ asked Françoise, who read the local paper daily, from the first line to the last.

‘A motor accident. A boy was run over in one of those new streets behind the shipyards. The Rue de l’Épargne, I think.’

‘Was he killed?’ Guérec plucked at his napkin nervously.

‘We don’t know yet. I left at once.’

Guérec had a curious impression, as if the light from the lamp were streaming out in separate, independent rays, and everything he looked at flickered. He could feel sweat trickling down his back. He tried to fix his eyes on the picture of his second boat, the *Céline*, whose stern was over-large – owing to a constructional defect. In dirty weather, with a following sea, she was extremely hard to navigate. Still, given reasonably calm weather, she wasn’t a bad boat, and anyhow they had got the builder to knock five thousand off his bill.

It was almost certain Émile would propose a game of cards. Cards were a passion with him. He had taught them all to play his favourite game, *belote*, and it was always he who added up the points, as none of the others had mastered the scoring. He did this very rapidly, with an air of casualness, flicking the cards one by one upon the table.

'Ten, that makes thirty. Forty-one. Twenty for *belote*, and ten for the last trick. Seventy-one.'

Céline, who was good at figures, would watch the cards falling from his hand, and sometimes put in a remark:

'Excuse me. Fourteen for that nine.'

'No, hearts are trumps.'

And so they were. One of his irritating habits was to be always right. Worse, he knew this and gloated over it. They played for quarter-centime points, and there was a special drawer in the cash-desk with small change always handy.

Only Marthe had never taken to the game, but merely looked on as she plied her knitting-needles. Sometimes, however, to show an interest, she would risk a timid comment:

'Why didn't you play your ace, dear?'

'Keep quiet! You don't know the first thing about the game.'

She took it meekly. Marriage seemed to have extinguished the last glimmer of independence in her. She was always quoting her husband's opinions, and saying to her sisters: 'You'd better ask Émile's advice about that.'

No sooner was the table cleared than Émile said:

'How about a thousand up at *belote*?'

By force of habit Françoise had got up and was fetching the green cloth stamped in red with the name of a distillery, on which they always played.

'Sorry,' said Guérec uncomfortably, 'I'm not feeling very fit to-night, and I think I'll go straight to bed.'

He kissed his sisters, shook his brother-in-law's hand and, to convince them he really felt ill, moved to the door with exaggerated slowness.

Before lighting the lamp in his bedroom he peered between the curtains. The street was in darkness, but there was a lamp at the far end of the quay and its rays seemed to be boring into his head, one after another. He knew that down there, at the foot of the steps hewn in the stone wall, the ferryman was

seated in the bows of his boat, waiting till it struck ten and he could go home to bed.

The surface of the road was coated with moisture; there was going to be a sea-fog. On the far side of the harbour, in the Old Town – the ‘Closed Town’ as it was sometimes called because of the ramparts surrounding it – some lights twinkled, sending out long arrowy rays, each well defined and separate from the others.

This curious light-effect he had been noticing all the evening was probably nothing new; but it was the first time it had struck him. Was it because his nerves were out of order? ... Then suddenly he thought of the long white beams of his headlights, the farm-cart rumbling up the hill, drawn by two white horses.

‘Not gone to bed yet?’

Céline had come in and was lighting his lamp. For some reason – what could it be? – she added:

‘What’s on your mind, Jules?’

‘Nothing.’

Were there still lighted windows in that street whose name Émile had mentioned – the Rue de l’Épargne? Émile, who must be furious at missing his game of *belote* ...

Serve him right!

CHAPTER II

IT was a near thing he hadn’t to stay at home that morning. No sooner had he come downstairs than his sisters noticed he had his best clothes on, and began expostulating. He had no business to go out now he’d started a cold; he’d better stay in bed, or anyhow indoors. They told him he was looking rotten and had dark rings round his eyes, which he could well believe after the appalling night he’d had – a series of horrible nightmares

which continued preying on his mind long after he'd forgotten what they were about.

'Must you go out? What have you got to do?'

'Well, for one thing I want to see Émile at the police station about my wallet. And after that I must go to the harbour; the man from Rennes is coming about the engine for the *Marthe*.'

The smell of coffee pervaded the house. A fisherman was hawking fish from door to door, jangling his bell. Rain was still falling, or, rather, the air was clogged with tiny particles of water that didn't seem to fall from the sky but hovered between it and the ground, linking the low grey clouds with the streaming cobbles.

'Did Marthe stay late?'

His eyes fell on the dish in which biscuits had been served the night before, and on a liqueur-glass redolent of brandy that stood on the sideboard. Émile's glass, needless to say.

'No. They left at ten.'

His sisters made him put a blue woollen muffler, knitted by Françoise, round his neck.

'Won't you take the car?'

He shook his head almost angrily, and set out on foot, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, his shoulders hunched, in a fair way to believe that he was really ill. He was conscious of Céline watching his receding form from the doorstep, as one watches a child starting out for school.

A child going to school! The thought jogged his memory, and he knew that soon they would beset him, his dark imaginings, though for a while yet he might stave them off. Just then his gaze fell on a small boy racing down the hill to catch the ferry. He, too, was wearing a knitted scarf, a check pinafore. His cheeks were flushed with the run in the cold air, and he was still panting as old Louis slowly sculled his wherry across the harbour.

The newspaper had been delivered half an hour before Guérec left the house. There had been a tinkle of the bell as

the postman pushed the door half open and, placing the folded paper on the nearest table, gave his usual shout

'It's me!'

Guerec had left the paper lying where it was, he had preferred not to open it in his sisters' presence

On his left lay the open sea, a glimmering expanse of greenish-grey, while on his right some row-boats were splashing across the harbour towards the fishing-smacks, which, made fast side by side, looked like an island topped by a grove of masts

Almost daily he met his friends on that floating island, lounging on their decks or scrambling over bulwarks. Throughout the off season they forgathered there, more from force of habit than because there was anything much to be done on board. One went to one's ship, unlocked the padlocks on the doors, and did such odd jobs as splicing ropes, tinkering with a pulley, putting an edge on chisels, while exchanging remarks from deck to deck.

As Guerec stepped off the ferry the small boy dashed on shore, almost tripping him up, and made off into the Old Town. Newspapers were on sale in a small shop just across the road, but Guerec thought it best to postpone buying one till he had got out of the Old Town, crossed the bridge, and reached the Quai de l'Aiguillon.

'Cheero, Jules!'

The man who hailed him was leaning on the rail of a schooner unloading tiles alongside the wharf. Guerec returned the greeting with a wave of his hand. To read the newspaper, he made his way to a street flanked by the blind walls of canning factories.

'A ROAD HOG AT CONCARNEAU'

'After running down a child, callous driver makes off without stopping'

That was so. He hadn't even looked back!

'Yesterday evening, the quiet Rue de l'Épargne, one of the new streets of workmen's cottages, was the scene of ...'

More than half a column was devoted to it. The newspaper was published at Quimper, and the quaint thing was that its Concarneau correspondent was none other than Émile Gloaguen. When he was away, the sergeant telephoned through the news-items.

At twenty centimes a line!

'The victim, Joseph Papin, a lad of six, generally known as Joe ...'

It seemed likely that his mother wasn't married, for they referred to her as 'Marie Papin', without a 'Madame', nor was anything said about a husband. On the other hand, they did not mention that she worked in a canning factory.

He also learnt that Joe had a twin brother, Edgar, who was, as it so happened, sick in bed.

'The boy has both legs broken and internal injuries are feared, for he complains of pains in his stomach ...'

Anyhow, he wasn't dead! But it was almost worse to know that he had both legs broken, because one couldn't help picturing him lying on the ground in an inert, twisted heap after the car had passed. Perhaps he had tried to struggle to his feet, and wondered why his legs wouldn't support him.

'The police had started enquiries ...'

He crumpled up the paper and dropped it in the gutter, for his sisters would wonder why he'd bought it, considering there was already a paper at home. After that he went to the police station and seated himself on the corner of his brother-in-law's desk.

'I've not forgotten. I put a call through to Quimper about your wallet. So far we've heard nothing from them.'

'No? ... Look here, will you tell me how to set about

getting a new driving-licence? There was the car-licence in it as well. What a damned annoying business!

The Superintendent was in his office, and just then he sent for Émile, with the result that Guérec had to twiddle his thumbs for a good quarter of an hour.

'Excuse me! I've a call to put through immediately.'

As it happened, the call concerned him, Guérec.

'Is that the *gendarmerie*? I want the sergeant. Gloaguen speaking. Thanks, quite all right. And how are you? Good! It's about that accident which happened yesterday. We've found there was a witness. Yes. A woman who lives in that street came to us this morning. She was on her way home, and only thirty yards from the boy when he was run over.'

He looked round and gave Guérec a wink, as if to say: 'You see! It's worth listening to!' Then went on talking.

'No, she didn't take the number. All that she noticed was that it ended in an 8. That's right. The Superintendent has talked it over with me and we've decided to have a list made of all the cars in these parts whose registration numbers end with 8. And then proceed by elimination. Right you are! See you presently.'

What a fantastic thing! It took Guérec's breath away so literally that when he wanted to say something he merely gaped. For the number of his car didn't end with an 8, but with a 3. Which meant that a lot of other motorists would be put through it, but not he.

'We'll nab him all right, you'll see,' said Émile, rubbing his hands. 'The mayor has given orders for us to take all possible steps to catch that dirty swine.'

'What sort of steps?'

'Didn't you hear? In cases of this sort one needs something to start off from, a *datum*, if you see what I mean. Well, thanks to that old woman who called in this morning, we've got it.'

So that was the way police enquiries were conducted! Guérec couldn't repress a scornful smile.

'I don't mind betting,' Gloaguen went on, 'it'll mean three years.'

'Three years?'

'Yes, three years in jail for the fellow who did it. Not to mention heavy damages if the child is crippled for life. His mother's very poor.'

'Isn't she married?'

'No. She lives by herself with her children.'

It started from this moment – though what 'it' meant was something Guérec couldn't possibly have put into words. From the moment he left the police station he realized that something – indeed everything – in his life had changed; he was plunged into a waking dream, muddled and incoherent as dreams are apt to be, and involving him in all sorts of grotesque complications.

He had had a foretaste of this already in the police station. When Émile mentioned that the boy had been taken to hospital, Guérec had made a wry face, and his brother-in-law noticed it. To account for it he said the first thing that came into his head:

'I had a nasty twinge just here.' He pointed to his heart. 'I've been having it several times lately. Damned painful it can be.'

'You should see a doctor. You're at an age when one's got to take heart troubles seriously.'

When he was in the street it struck him that these mysterious twinges would be a better explanation than a cold if his sisters noticed anything amiss. Also, this way, they wouldn't try to stop his going out.

'Yes,' he told himself, 'when I get home I'll tell them my heart's giving trouble.'

As a matter of fact, he had really had pains of that kind once or twice, but as they always accompanied an attack of indigestion he couldn't be sure his heart had anything to do with them.

He walked up the Rue de l'Épargne. All the little houses, he noticed, were one-storied and exactly alike. The hawker who had been to the Guérecs' in the early morning was crying his fish from house to house, basket in hand. At No. 17, where Marie Papin lived, all the curtains were drawn and nobody was visible.

By daylight the street looked quite different. The place where he had turned the car seemed much farther away. There was soft ground at this point and the marks of his tyres could be seen.

That might lead to trouble. Suppose they thought of examining those tyre-prints ... But so it is, anyhow, the police were only interested in cars whose numbers terminated in an 8.

Guérec entered the shipyard on his right, where the hull of the fishing-boat he had building could be seen, still in the rough, inside a nest of scaffolding. He climbed on deck by a ladder and shook hands with the shipwright.

'How's the work getting on?'

'Not too badly - except that one of my men is sick and that's holding us up a bit. The lead pipes have just come. When are they delivering the engine?'

Poised in mid-air, resting on the stocks, the boat seemed amazingly high. Workmen were sawing, planing, hammering on all sides.

'In ten days' time, but the men to instal it can't come till after Christmas.'

'Did you read about that poor kid's being run over last night?'

Guérec looked away.

'I hear the other boy, the one who's sick, keeps asking for his brother. They're so much alike that their mother has to dress them differently to distinguish them. Nice trick they are. My youngster sees a lot of them. Do you know, only the other day all three of them were playing together on this deck?'

From their vantage-point they could see right across the

harbour and, on the far side, near the ferry, the Guérecs' house. Someone was shaking a carpet out at one of the windows, Françoise most likely, as it wasn't the day the charwoman came.

'Is the car running all right?'

'Quite well, thanks.'

'You're getting the hang of it, I expect. By the way, what did they decide at Quimper yesterday?'

'Nothing definite. There'll be another meeting next week. Some of them say they'll lay up their ships if they don't get satisfaction.'

'They say that every year, but they always climb down in the end.'

Guérec walked home, and twenty yards from the door began unconsciously to rehearse the part he was to play, even tapping his chest above his heart. The queerest thing was that he actually began to feel a sort of ache there.

'What's wrong with you?' Céline didn't need to look twice at her brother to notice something abnormal.

'I wish I knew. Yesterday I thought I'd caught cold, but it isn't that. It's not the first time I've had a queer sort of pain in the region of my heart.'

His sister gave him a suspicious look.

'In your heart, you say?'

'Yes - just here.'

Françoise was easy game. But Céline had a kind of second sight where her brother was concerned. Even by the way he opened the door, for instance, she knew at once if he had been drinking, though generally he'd had no more than a glass or two of brandy and wasn't in the least affected by it.

'Show me your tongue.'

After he had done so she gave her verdict.

'Yes; we'll start with a good dose of castor-oil. But if you really want to know what's wrong with you, I can tell you. You don't take enough exercise. For the last two months,

since the boats were laid up, you've done nothing but loaf about, without ever doing a job of work. What's more, you're getting fat.'

That, too, was correct. He had noticed that his cheeks were getting rather flabby.

'I must hurry up,' she added. 'I'm going to the hospital.'

He had quite a shock. Indeed, the remark was so unexpected that for a moment he really thought his sister was going to see the injured boy. But how on earth could she have found out ...?

'To the hospital?' he repeated feebly.

'That's what I said. Why do you look so surprised about it? It's the day I always go.'

If he didn't watch himself better, he'd end by betraying himself. His sisters belonged to a group of charitable ladies who took turns visiting the hospital and dispensing food and comforts to the poorer patients. Their turn came once a month ... All the same, that was a nasty trick, mentioning it just now when his nerves were still on the stretch!

'Do sit down, Jules! It's maddening to see you mooning about the room like a lost soul.'

She was knitting. She could go on knitting for whole days on end, always seated at the same place beside the window. The curtain was drawn aside so that she missed nothing happening in the street.

During the winter, hours went by without a customer appearing, for the Guérecs were primarily ship-chandlers and when a housewife called in for half a pound of rice or a tin of sardines Céline always made her feel she ought to have gone for it to the grocer's in the Church Square.

'Did you see Émile?'

'Yes. A witness has come forward. The car has a number that ends with an 8.'

'So you've seen the paper?' She sounded surprised.

'Well - er - no! As a matter of fact, it was Émile who talked to me about the accident. The little boy's still alive. I hear he

has a twin brother so much like him that you can't tell one from the other.'

Why couldn't he have kept his mouth shut? He realized how dangerous it was, bringing up this topic, but something egged him on against his better judgement.

'There's no husband, I understand. No one knows who the children's father is.'

As he spoke he watched Céline's face. A curious face, so different from other women's. Not that the features weren't regular; she had a very straight nose, dark blue eyes, and indeed a certain handsomeness. But there was something about her, and about Françoise too, that made them look not so much masculine as sexless. Others must have noticed that, for no man had ever courted either.

Marthe, on the other hand, though definitely plainer, had been twice engaged, and made a good match when in her forties.

'Aren't you going to change?'

'No. I shall probably be going out again this afternoon.'

It was a family tradition that one should always change into old clothes whenever one came home from the town.

'Where's Françoise?'

'Upstairs, doing the rooms.'

They talked about him at lunch, and it was decided that if there was no improvement within the next few days they'd consult the doctor.

It was another grey, misty afternoon. Guerec walked past the hospital and turned into the *Café de l'Amiral* for a drink. The place was empty and in semi-darkness – the lamps were never lit, however dark the day, till nightfall – and the landlord's wife, who was drowsing over her accounts, had quite a start when he walked in. She called to a waitress in Breton costume, who went down to the cellar to get a bottle of beer.

After that he dawdled on the wharf, shook hands with the

skipper of the schooner, a friend of his, who was on the lookout for another cargo.

He was haunted by the thought of the child's broken legs, and pictures kept hovering in his mind of a small boy's body with the legs limp and loose, like a rag doll's, so that you could bend them in any direction.

The temptation was too strong. He went back to the Rue de l'Épargne and walked past the cottage; the street lamps were just being lit. This time he walked very slowly. He recognized the patches of light on the wet surface of the road, and suddenly bent down and picked up something from the gutter – half a small wooden clog.

It was the child's; there could be no doubt about it. And somehow Guérec couldn't bring himself to drop it, and kept it in his hand for a good hundred yards. Finally he laid it on the ground beside a wooden fence, very gently, as if it were some precious object he was afraid of damaging.

It wasn't one of the Gloaguens' days, and he felt at a loose end all the evening as he watched Françoise embarking on a big sewing job, the making of a black velvet dress that was to be ready for the New Year. All the tables were strewn with pins and bits of thread. Now and then Céline gave her sister a hand with measuring off the material on a grey paper pattern, and they discoursed of box-pleats and false hems.

'Were there many patients in hospital to-day?' he asked Céline.

'Yes – and I saw little Joe, the boy who was run over, you know. There wasn't any room in the children's ward, so they've put him with the women. He doesn't cry at all, he just gazes at the nurses with big, wondering eyes. I gave him two oranges and he thanked me most politely.'

Next day he learned the news from Louis, the ferryman.

'Have you heard? The kid who was run over died last night – or rather this morning, just after sunrise. I was talking to his mother an hour ago. It seems he didn't suffer much. He

had an injury in the stomach. They gave him an injection and he lay quite quiet on his back, staring at the ceiling.'

Guérec very nearly turned into the nearest café, to drink himself fuddled – but the mere idea of drinking turned his stomach. He hurried across the town, took the Beuzec road, then walked along the Sables Blancs beach, fringed by empty villas. By now he was feeling really ill; it was more than a mere pretext. His knee-joints seemed to have given way and his legs sagged at each step through the sodden sand; and there was a dull ache in his chest.

He hadn't shed a single tear, nor even felt one welling up. For what he felt was worse than sorrow; he was utterly disgusted with himself. He loathed his own company, but no sooner was he with others than he found he couldn't get a word out, and had to leave.

The sea was as grey as ever, the clouds hung low. Three hundred yards out a dredger was at work, and he could hear the soft thud of sand being tipped into the lighters.

Émile had said three years' imprisonment. *At least* three years. But what good would that do? It wouldn't bring the dead child back to life. The only difference, if the case came to court, would be that the mother would get damages.

Perhaps ten thousand francs. But really he had no idea how damages are assessed in such cases. One of his men who had lost two fingers through a break in the windlass-tackle had been awarded only five thousand; but they were fingers of his left hand. For a six-year-old child – what would a court award?

Suddenly an idea occurred to him, a horrible idea! He stopped abruptly and gazed out to sea, his feet sinking in the moist sand. Suppose Marie Papin hadn't enough money for the funeral?

Anyhow, he could send her some – that was the least he could do. Anonymously, of course. What about ten thousand francs?

The trouble was – how to lay hands on the money. It was Céline who kept the accounts, paid bills, and signed documents, on behalf of the family, at the bank, and he never had the handling of large sums.

There was, of course, the possibility of borrowing the money from someone – from Argentin, for instance, who was building his boat and knew he could be trusted. Argentin would probably jump to the conclusion he had a mistress, and chuckle to himself. That wouldn't matter. But what if he mentioned it to other people? What, if little by little, the truth leaked out?

He walked home, taking long strides, and when he opened the door looked so wretched that Céline became genuinely alarmed.

'What's wrong? Is your heart troubling you again?'

'I'm not sure ... I only know I feel rotten and I'm going up to my room for a bit.'

'Wait! Let me have a look at you.'

He hadn't even the right to nurse his grief in peace! He had to submit to being mauled about by Céline, who lifted his eyelids and examined the whites of his eyes in the best professional manner.

'We'll go to Quimper tomorrow,' she said, 'to see the doctor.'

They had had the same doctor for twenty or thirty years, and the idea of consulting another would never have entered Céline's head. In any case, illnesses were rare in their family.

'Didn't you hear what I said? We'll go to the doctor tomorrow and get his opinion.'

'Yes.' He said 'Yes' without thinking, and corrected himself at once. 'No!'

'No – what?'

'I mean I'm not going to Quimper.'

'Why not?'

'I don't feel up to driving along that road; I couldn't manage all those turnings.'

'Very well. Then we'll take the bus.'

He made no reply. His one desire was to be alone, but when he was in his bedroom it was almost worse. What could he do? Nothing. He wasn't sleepy, nor did he want to lie down.

He went to the window and rested his elbows on the sill. Each time he saw the ferry it reminded him of what the ferryman had told him that morning. To make things worse, he could see, above the ramparts of the Old Town, the slate roof of the hospital.

She must be there now, weeping beside the dead child's body. Had she any money put by? Probably, like most of the factory girls, she was out of work, for the canning factories had been closed during the last two months.

'Why don't you go to bed?'

Céline, of course. One never heard her coming and she had a knack of opening doors without making the hinges creak. Her eyes had that darkly menacing expression they used to have when he was a small boy and had done something wrong. In those days it was never his parents who found him out, but Céline; lying to her was practically hopeless.

'Undress and go to bed.'

'No. I couldn't sleep.'

'Now listen, Jules! I want to know what you did at Quimper the day before yesterday.'

'What I did at Quimper?'

'That's what I said, my dear.'

When she wanted to worm something out of him she always used that gentle, wheedling tone, but he knew it wouldn't last. Once she'd got what she wanted her voice would change.

'Do you imagine I've been taken in?'

He was startled, and for a moment really thought she'd guessed there was a connexion between the accident and his present state.

‘What on earth do you mean?’

‘Oh, I saw how uncomfortable you were when you told us about your wallet.’

‘Ah, so *that’s* what you’re getting at!’

The ceiling of the room was low and spanned by a big beam that Guérec almost touched with his head when he went to his dressing-table, which, like the shelves and chest-of-drawers, was strewn with knick-knacks, souvenirs of his first communion, bits of embroidery, picture-postcards sent by friends on their honeymoon trips.

‘If you’d lost your wallet at the *Café Jean* it would certainly have been found.’

‘Why are you so sure of that?’

He was beginning to wonder if it wouldn’t be wiser to own up to something so as to avoid having to tell the truth.

‘I rang them up,’ his sister continued.

‘Well, what did they say?’

‘I asked what time you left. They sent for the waiter and he didn’t seem to remember anything about it.’

‘Perhaps he didn’t see me go.’

‘Now look here, Jules, it’s no use beating about the bush. You were with a woman again, weren’t you?’

During one of his previous visits to Quimper, just as he was accosting a woman like the one he’d been with the other day, who should appear but Céline? She had come to Quimper unexpectedly, as the ironmonger had offered her a lift in his car. And ever since she always had suspicions ...

‘Out with it! I won’t reproach you. After all, you’re old enough to know your own business. It’s a matter between you and your conscience.’

Still doubtful what line to take, he gazed through the window at the wintry sky.

‘It was she who stole your wallet, wasn’t it? You had about a hundred francs left, I should say.’

‘Yes.’

'Ah! You admit it?'

He lowered his eyes. It was the best way out.

'Very clever of you, wasn't it? And no doubt you thought yourself very smart telling us all those lies and letting Émile telephone all over the place to try to trace your wallet? ... Not to mention that one day you'll be coming back with some loathsome disease ...'

'Céline!'

'Have you been to confession, anyhow?'

He had hardly heard the question, but he nodded.

'Now go to bed. You see, there's nothing much wrong with you. It was preying on your conscience, that's why you've been feeling low.'

Had there been a lock to the door he'd have locked himself in, but there wasn't even a bolt. There was nothing to prevent Céline or Françoise, who was dusting in the adjoining room, from coming in to disturb him again. In which case he wouldn't even have the right to look annoyed. And if he'd hoped for the relief of tears, this too was ruled out ...

The bell rang two or three times in the big room below. He had taken off his jersey, then, feeling chilly, put on an old one that had shrunk, and cramped his shoulders.

How could he manage to get some money to Marie Papin? He must keep his mind fixed on that problem. Anyhow, it would be less painful than picturing every moment the small mangled body, the injection, the internal injuries.

First, whom could he tackle for a loan? That rat-faced brother-in-law of his? Emile certainly had money put by and it was he who held the purse-strings of his household. But he'd jump at this chance of delivering one of those tiresome homilies that were his speciality. He had a tremendous idea of himself, had Rat-face, and loved nothing better than giving others a piece of his mind. If he, Guérec, borrowed money from Émile, it would give that brother-in-law of his an opportunity of throwing his weight about; he'd never hear the end

of it. In fact, Émile would come to think he had the Guérecs in his pocket.

‘Are you asleep?’

This time it was Françoise; holding the door ajar, she was peeping into the room. To her surprise he was on his feet, he couldn’t bring himself to lie or even to sit down.

‘Celine’s told me all about it.’

‘Has she now?’

- ‘Yes, and I said to her it was much better that way than if you kept a mistress, like so many men ... I say, wouldn’t you like me to bring you a cup of hot chocolate?’

‘No, thanks.’

‘If you’re not going to bed, you might as well come downstairs.’

His nerves were so much on edge that he almost shouted at her.

‘No, I won’t come downstairs. All I want is to be left in peace. In peace, can’t you understand?’

There were tears of exasperation in his eyes. His sister stared at him dumbfounded before withdrawing from the doorway. He strode across the room and closed the door, and it was almost with a thrill of pleasure that he came back to the phantoms of his mind to Marie Papin, the little boy, and the twin brother exactly like him .. How could he contrive to get money to them?

CHAPTER III

WHEN Martin came from the kitchen, carrying a fragrant dish of lobsters, Celine did something she had got into the way of doing recently, she made a little sign to her brother. Strictly speaking, it was hardly a sign; she had only to look at him in a special way, and the look was a reminder

'You know what the doctor said ...

He sighed. She had him beat, and he knew it. And, while the others tucked in, he stared glumly at his empty plate.

It was the second anniversary of Marthe's wedding. The two sisters and brother had been invited to dine at the little flat overlooking the Quai de l'Aiguillon, and the Gloaguens had done things well. There were flowers on the table, four glasses beside each place, two bottles of Burgundy having the chill taken off near the fireplace, and champagne stood under a running tap in the kitchen. Emile was in great form and, though it was only a family gathering, saw to it that everything passed off in style.

Out of doors it was freezing for the first time that winter. The sky was clear and the moonlight so bright that you could read a newspaper in the street.

'Can't he really have anything to eat, Céline? Just a bite?'

Guérec preferred to hold his peace. What had happened was so ridiculous, and the funeral was responsible.

For on the day the child was buried he had been seized by panic, a haunting dread he might betray himself by some unguarded show of feeling. He could see numbers of people crossing in the ferry on their way to the house where the body lay, and Françoise, out of curiosity, was amongst them.

Complaining of vague pains inside, Guérec had refused to leave his room, and Céline had ordered him to bed. It was a dirty day, blowing hard and raining. As he listened to the tolling of the bell all sorts of strange ideas kept running in his head. Then, towards two, Céline had burst in triumphantly with a doctor, a dapper little man whom he had never seen before, a new-comer to Concarneau.

It had been an ordeal. The doctor was nothing if not thorough, and, like many French medical men, preferred direct auscultation to the use of a stethoscope. He had spent a good ten minutes with his ear pressed to a towel laid on Guérec's chest, prodding him in the ribs and murmuring now and then

‘Breathe deeply!’

The light in the room was grey. Céline remained beside the stool on which her brother sat, her eyes fixed on the pale blue of his chest. The doctor persisted in saying nothing and fluttered about his patient like a pertinacious insect hovering round some large, long-suffering animal.

‘Now lie down!’

After carefully feeling Guérec’s liver and spleen he produced from his bag a rubber armlet and fitted it round his patient’s arm. When he went out, leaving Guérec to his thoughts, he had still vouchsafed no opinion. Only when he was downstairs did he say to the two sisters:

‘His blood-pressure’s the trouble. We must put him on diet.’

That had been a fortnight ago, and Guérec still had no idea if he was really ill or not. He watched the others eating lobster and, while his sisters fancied he was suffering the pangs of hunger, was actually thinking about something quite different, wondering if the moment was propitious.

Abruptly, after wiping his lips with his napkin, he began:

‘By the way ...’

Céline fixed her eyes on him – just what he’d been dreading.

‘I’ve just engaged a ... a poor young fellow who will be very useful ...’

‘For what?’

His cheeks were scarlet and he didn’t dare to look any of them in the face. To make things worse, he could see his reflexion in the glass above the mantelpiece.

‘The two boats, especially the *Françoise*, need a thorough cleaning up. This man will work on board every day, and I’ve put him on to scraping the paintwork to begin with. I shouldn’t care to go to sea with the boats in their present state.’

‘When did you engage him?’

‘This afternoon.’

‘Without consulting us!’

And suddenly Marthe had an impression that the lobster she was eating had become tasteless. She felt all at sea; never had anything of this sort occurred before.

‘Who is he?’

‘A poor devil who’s only too glad to have a regular job and will do his best to give satisfaction, I’m quite sure. His name is Papin.’

‘Papin?’

Hanging his head, his eyes bent on his empty plate, he said uncomfortably:

‘Don’t you remember that woman who had her child run over? He’s her brother.’

The queer thing was, he could hardly remember now how it had come about. Perhaps he really was ill, as the doctor had said, and that explained his present state of mind. For the last fortnight he’d been feeling depressed, utterly sick of life, and his sisters, needless to say, had noticed this. One day Céline said to him:

‘Why don’t you go to sea for a bit of inshore fishing? It’s worth trying anyhow.’

‘What’s the good? The other fellows who went out have had the catch left on their hands.’

There was some truth in this; all the same, in previous years it had not prevented him from taking one of the two fishing-boats to sea during the winter season. As it was, time hung heavy on his hands; he couldn’t spend the whole day in the shipyard watching the building of the new ketch. Now and again he went down to the harbour and started a job of work on one of the two others, but somehow he never could stick to it.

Inevitably he found his feet taking him to the Rue de l’Épargne. And at last, on the fourth day, he saw a child

dressed all in black, who was certainly the little Papin, coming home from school. A pale-checked, fair-haired little lad, with blue, rather melancholy eyes, and, judging by his scraggy legs and prominent knee-joints, miserably thin. Not tall enough to ring the bell, he rattled the letter-box in his mother's door.

On another occasion Guérec saw a young man carrying some fishing-tackle entering the house. Who could it be? For some reason that escaped him, the sight of this young man got on his nerves.

The days were short, and the evenings seemed interminable. Celine had embarked on a task that would see her through the winter, she was embroidering a table-runner with a very complicated pattern in several colours, that necessitated calling on Françoise every few minutes for assistance and advice. Marthe, too, gave a hand whenever she dropped in. In fact, all three sisters had joined forces for this *chef d'œuvre*; each made suggestions and helped in picking out and matching lengths of coloured silk.

He had tried to settle down to reading, but he had never been one for books. At last, wearing spectacles, which completely changed his appearance, he had begun making up his accounts for the year, and stayed for hours in the dining-room, surrounded by receipts and cash-books.

But why did his thoughts hark back constantly to that cottage in the little bye-street, and why did he sometimes stop in the middle of an addition to murmur to himself:

'I wonder what that kid's up to now? Doing his lessons? Or is he being put to bed?'

And Marie Papin – what was she doing? But he didn't even know what she looked like. After the funeral Françoise had said to him:

'She doesn't look at all strong. She fainted during the service and they had to carry her to the vestry.'

He pictured her blonde and blue-eyed like her son, and with the same creamy complexion. And this mental picture proved

fairly true to life when one morning he saw her, for the first time, on her doorstep, talking to the postman. What struck him most was that she seemed so young, not more than twenty, a mere girl. She too wore mourning, with a check apron over her black dress. Presumably she had been doing her housework, as a coil of yellow hair had come loose and was dangling on her neck.

He had no chance of hearing her voice, as he walked quickly by, on the other side of the road; for he was beginning to fear he might attract attention. Also he was beginning to be impressed by the fuss Céline was making about his health, her perpetual refrain, 'Don't forget what the doctor said ...' They even measured out his cider, had mashed potatoes and boiled vegetables specially for him at every meal.

'You had another bad night. I heard you groan.'

Because he had been dreaming – always the same dream.

He often went to see his engineer, just to have a pretext for passing Marie Papin's door. Though he didn't dare to bring up her name, he was always hoping the conversation would come round to her. But just now the great topic was a fire which had gutted a big canning factory – there were rumours it was due to sabotage on the part of workmen who had been laid off – and the man could talk of nothing else.

Even Émile had stopped referring to 'the 8s case' as he called it, meaning the efforts made to trace the car that had caused the child's death.

That morning Guérec had walked to the end of the seawall, his hands in his pockets, and stopped to watch two or three old men fishing. Presently his eyes fell on a young man who was hauling up a fair-sized eel, and he suddenly recognized him as the man he'd seen entering Marie Papin's cottage.

'Quite a big one,' he remarked, by way of starting a conversation.

The young man looked round with an amiable grin but a gaze so vacant as to make Guérec feel embarrassed, and

proceeded to stammer out some unintelligible words, still smiling.

One of the ancient mariners had been watching the scene and, when Guerec took a step towards him, said

‘Don’t you know who that is?’

‘No.’

‘He’s the brother of that woman who had her boy run over, Marie Papin. Not all there, he ain’t, poor lad’

That had given him the notion. He had spent an hour turning it over in his mind as he walked about the town, and had even gone to the *Cafe de l’Amiral* to see if he could glean further information

‘Do you know Marie Papin’s brother?’ he asked one of the men there, point blank

‘The loonie, you mean?’

And Guerec learned that the young man spent most of his time loafing about the harbour or fishing from the sea wall, as no one would give him a job. A pity he should be like that, as he was a strapping young chap of twenty – but there it was!

‘How does his sister manage?’

‘Since the factory shut down she’s been taking in washing, though I don’t know how she makes enough to keep the three of ’em’

When lunch time came he still refrained from saying any thing to his sisters, though it made him feel rather guilty. To prepare the ground, however, he let fall a casual remark

‘You’d never believe how dirty our boats are!’

But they were far from guessing the news he was about to spring on them.

When at three he rang Marie Papin’s door bell, his heart was racing like a lover’s, he wondered if he’d find his words, and almost hoped she wasn’t in. But then he heard footsteps in the hall, and the door opened. Wiping her wet hands on her apron, she gazed at him enquiringly

‘Yes?’

'Excuse me. I've come to see you about your brother.'

'Has he been giving trouble?'

'No ... Not at all ... Quite the contrary.'

That 'Quite the contrary' was an absurd thing to say, but it had come out like that.

'I thought of giving him a job,' he went on hastily. 'My name is Guérec, Jules Guérec.'

'Ah, yes – you own two fishing-boats, don't you?'

'Yes, and I find I shall be needing a day-watchman for them, and there's a lot of small jobs to be done on board. So, if he's willing ...'

'Do you know him?'

Apparently it didn't strike her to ask him in, and he remained on the doorstep, she in the hall.

'Well, I know he's not ... not quite normal.'

'He's out now. If you like, I'll send him round tomorrow. To the shop, I suppose?'

'Well, no. I'd rather call in here for him.'

'What time?'

'At about eight, if that's convenient.'

A moment later he was walking down the street again, his cap still in his hand. She was just as he'd imagined. There was one thing about her, however, that puzzled him – her apathy. She seemed only half-alive, and when they talked together she had spoken in a listless voice, using the minimum of words. He almost wondered if, like her brother, she was 'not all there', though to a much less degree.

Then, 'No,' he murmured, 'that's not it. She's had a hard life and it's embittered her. That explains everything.'

Anyhow, it was a relief to have found a way of helping her. How much should he pay her brother? Twenty francs a day? No, he daren't pay more than fifteen; Céline would flare up if he gave a mere day-watchman – let alone a feeble-minded one – as much as twenty.

The best time to break the news would be that evening, at

the Gloaguens', and to bring the subject up quite casually. That would avoid long explanations.

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Marthe, who had a shrewd insight into her two sisters' minds, watched Céline, who, as she went on eating, said:

'That Papin boy - isn't he half-witted?'

'Well, he's not quite normal. But he's quite a decent young fellow; I've made enquiries about him.'

'Without telling us!'

'It hardly seemed worth mentioning. Anyhow, I've been meaning to have the boats cleaned up for some time, as I think I told you.'

Even his ears were scarlet! Of course it was terribly hot in the cramped little dining-room, which was overcrowded with furniture and ornaments.

'Anyhow, I take it you haven't fixed anything up definitely?'

'I have.'

But the storm didn't break. That was Céline's way; the angrier she was, the calmer she became. Only her face changed, grew long and pinched, her nose seemed more acute than ever, and her pupils narrowed to pinpoints.

'It's all very queer. What do you think about it, Françoise? And you, Émile?'

'Well, really, I ...'

'I'm not only thinking of the ... the irregularity. We all have equal shares in the boats, and as a rule he'd never dream of taking on even a deck-boy without discussing it with us ...'

Marthe had risen and was placing a roast fowl on the table. Her husband too was on his feet, pouring claret into their glasses with the slow precaution due to vintage wine. Meanwhile Céline continued:

'I know the people in this place much better than he does, and every time he's tried to do something off his own bat he's been had.'

'Suppose we change the subject?' Guérec suggested feebly.

'Why? We're only the family here, and we don't need to mince our words. For some time, Jules, you've been in a queer state. I'd like to know what lies behind it.'

'A woman, I dare say,' Françoise suggested with a smile.

'Yes, I shouldn't be surprised. He's been seen several times at the *Café de l'Amiral* and there are some pretty waitresses there.'

Émile gave his brother-in-law a furtive wink, but Guérec wasn't in a laughing mood.

'I suppose you think yourselves mighty clever,' he began sulkily, pushing his plate away.

'Shall I tell Émile what you were up to at Quimper, the day you lost your wallet?'

'Tell away! Anyhow, he's guessed it by now.'

Marthe intervened as peacemaker.

'Look here, it's our wedding anniversary tonight. For heaven's sake, let's talk of something cheerful ... I've just got the pattern of that dress from Paris; I'll show it to you after dinner – you must tell me what you think of it.'

The truce lasted just ten minutes, which was the time it took to eat the chicken and serve up the salad. Marthe did the service, and very well; she had quite a talent for entertaining and enjoyed displaying it. On the mantelpiece was a box of cigars, and several liqueur-bottles were arrayed on a side table.

Émile, too, was in high spirits, beaming on the white damask cloth, the flowers, the highly polished furniture. Each time he raised his glass to his lips he sniffed the aroma of the wine for some moments before drinking.

'It's nine years old,' he explained to Guérec, 'and an excellent vintage. I got it through one of my men whose family live near Bordeaux.'

As they rose from table, hostilities were resumed. Céline approached her brother, smiling, as if wanting to make peace, and said in a low tone:

‘What came over you to do a silly thing like that?’

He turned away ill-humouredly and she laid her hand on his shoulder.

‘Look here! I take it nothing’s definitely settled, and we can talk it over tomorrow. I must make enquiries about this lad. We’ve got to know whether he’s up to earning his pay. By the way, how much did you say you’d give him?’

‘Fifteen francs a day.’

‘You must be crazy. Fifteen francs a day for a half-wit who’ll make a mess of everything he puts a hand to! Now, if you’d said two hundred francs a month ...’

‘Will you please drop the subject, Céline?’

‘Coffee?’ Marthe broke in amiably.

‘Not for Jules. Doctor’s orders!’

‘Damn the doctor!’ he muttered under his breath.

‘What did you say?’

‘That’s my affair. And let me tell you, you’re getting on my nerves ...’

‘And how about me? Do you think it doesn’t worry me to see you in this state? I don’t want to have that old business all over again.’

She’d come out with it! He’d had a feeling it was going to be dragged up, as it usually was when they quarrelled – which was two or three times a year.

The incident to which she always referred as ‘that old business’ had taken place fifteen years before; but apparently he was never to hear the end of it. On a fair-day he had made the acquaintance of a girl of seventeen, a poor, half-starved little creature with a quaint bird-like face and eyes as keen as gimlets.

They’d had a good time together, and he looked her up now and again after that. Then one fine day she told him she was pregnant.

The weeks that followed had been even worse in their way than these last few weeks Guérec had been living through.

Finally he had thought best to confess his trouble to his sisters, for the girl's parents were on their high horse and insisting on his marrying her.

Really, however, it was a frame-up, and they treated it on strictly business lines, knowing the Guérecs were well off. As for the girl, whose name was Germaine, she was no novice; at the age of fifteen she'd taken to the primrose path, and Guérec was not her first by any means.

On hearing of his mishap Céline had said quite calmly:

'I'll see to it.'

And she had seen to it with such success that Germaine's parents had accepted a paltry three thousand francs and the girl herself had been packed off to Paris. Incidentally, chance had favoured the Guérecs; the child had been still-born.

That was the 'old business' Céline had referred to. It had been a touch-and-go affair; the family had all but been involved in a nasty scandal. Germaine's father had threatened to throw mud on their windows and, after collecting a crowd, to inform them of his daughter's 'betrayal'.

'Tomorrow I'll have a look at your half-wit and tell you what I think of him.'

He might have pretended to agree, inwardly resolving to enforce his will next day. And this, judging by a meaning look that Émile shot him, was what his brother-in-law seemed to counsel. But for some obscure reason Guérec was not in a mood to climb down, and he said, though without any show of anger:

'That would be waste of time. It's all settled.'

'You don't mean to say you've given him a contract in writing?'

'I've given my word, and that's the same thing.'

'Don't be so silly! Quite likely the boy didn't understand what you were saying, or even if he did, has forgotten about it by now.'

'I fixed it up with his sister.'

'His sister? You mean the woman whose child was run over? So you know her?'

What was it egged him on to continue this futile discussion? He knew he was only making things worse, but somehow he could not bring himself to stop. Not to mention that the blood had gone to his head and everyone could see his discomfort.

'I made her acquaintance to-day,' he said. 'I went to her to propose what I've just mentioned.'

'So you arranged all this deliberately, without breathing a word to us about it? What do you make of that, Françoise?'

'Well, Jules has been so queer for some time past ...'

'What's she like, this woman?'

'She's in mourning, and looks down in her luck.'

'Is that all you have to say about her?'

And Celine scrutinized him with that special look in her eyes which always intimidated him. But, unexpectedly enough, she let the subject drop, merely remarking in a disagreeable tone:

'Very good!'

Then, turning to Émile, she asked how many lumps of sugar he wanted in his coffee. A bottle of Calvados had just been opened and its heavy fumes were rising in the hot, stagnant air. Émile was waiting for everyone to have settled down again after the move from the table before making his usual proposal for a game of *belote*.

'Sorry!' Guérec murmured. 'I'm afraid you must count me out; I'm going straight home to bed.'

Émile looked quite indignant, but Guérec was resolute and, turning to Celine, said:

'Give me the key, please.'

'How are we going to get in when we come back?'

'I'll come downstairs and open the door.'

They let him go without much protest, except from Émile, who was missing his game of cards yet again.

Once he was on the water-front, Guérec took deep breaths

of the frost-bound air, and automatically began walking towards the Rue de l'Épargne. It took him a good deal out of his way; the direct way home was through the Old Town and then across the harbour by the ferry, and his sisters had warned the ferryman to be on the look-out.

He was almost glad of the quarrel, for it had given him a chance of talking about Marie Papin. He walked rapidly to the corner of the street, then slowed down, his eyes fixed on the cottage.

There was no light at any of the windows; probably she was in bed. Unless – for it was only nine – she'd gone to the pictures. No, that wasn't likely. She was in mourning, and when one's just had a bereavement one doesn't go to entertainments.

He was at once depressed and happy; indeed, his mind was a chaos of conflicting thoughts and emotions. Strongest of all was a feeling of suspense and terrible impatience, for he had an impression something was going to happen – though he had not the faintest idea what that 'something' was. All he knew was that he was at a turning-point; a great change was impending in his life.

It was curious to think that there was another little boy, the exact double of the dead one. Was that a consolation to his mother, or did the sight of him keep reminding her of her loss? Well, one day he would find that out; he would probably be seeing her from time to time, now that he had taken her brother into his employment.

Céline had pricked up her ears when he mentioned Marie's name, and he knew what that meant. She'd start nosing round the very next day, and nothing, not the most private detail of Marie's life, would long remain unknown to her.

There was still time enough for him to walk past the cottage once again, and he did so, even halting for a moment on the opposite side of the road, and wondering if the window on the upper floor were that of Marie's bedroom.

When he reached his own door he could not bring himself to enter at once; he had not the least wish to go to bed. So he went down to the water-front and, sitting on the edge of the quay, gazed at the housetops of the Old Town fretting the moonlit sky.

The ferryman was in his boat, smoking his pipe, on the far side of the harbour. He had not noticed Guérec, and he too was waiting; there were two of them awaiting the same women, while half unconsciously they listened to the murmur of waves outside the harbour and noted that the sea was getting up.

A fishing-boat glided past; someone going out to lay lobster-pots off the Gabelou rocks.

It was a Saturday and there was a cinema show in the Central Square and dancing was in full swing in the dance-hall up the little street behind the *Café de l'Amiral* – where Guérec had never set foot again since that 'old business' of distressful memory.

He had never learnt what had become of Germaine. She had not been seen again in Concarneau. Her mother was dead and her father, a drunkard, hawked fish in the streets.

The air was clear and still, and when he heard a sound of distant voices he recognized them at once; it was his sisters coming down one of the narrow, echoing streets of the Old Town. The ferryman put his scull in place and held out his hands towards the two dim forms. Céline jumped, Françoise entered the boat more prudently.

'You've not seen Jules?'

'No, I haven't taken him across.'

Though now they were only a few yards away they hadn't seen him yet.

'That's strange,' said Céline thoughtfully.

'I can't help thinking you were wrong to go for him like that. He's feeling seedy, and that explains ...'

'Don't you understand? It was a matter of principle. If we

once let him start doing that sort of thing, there's no knowing where it will stop.'

He made a movement; the two women looked round.

'Hullo, it's you! How did you get here?'

'I walked round the harbour.'

'Why didn't you go home? You looked so tired.'

'Oh, I felt better once I was in the fresh air.'

'All the same, we must go and see the doctor at Quimper. This local man may be good, but we can't be sure.'

On reaching home the three of them walked up the polished pitch-pine stairs together, without pausing on the ground floor.

'Yes,' Céline said. 'We'll go to Quimper tomorrow in the car.'

'I don't want to take the car out.'

'Really, I can't see what use it is our having a car. It hasn't left the garage for three weeks.'

'And it can stay there for three years, for all I care!'

All the same, he kissed both his sisters before entering his room. After shutting the door he remained seated for some minutes on the edge of his bed, forgetting he had adopted this position in order to take his shoes off.

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When he came down next morning in his working kit Céline gave him a long starg.

'Going out fishing?' she asked in her most sugary tone.

When at a loose end, he sometimes amused himself laying ground-lines in the harbour for conger-eels.

'No, I'm going to the boats.'

'To work on them? All by yourself?'

He couldn't understand why she was smiling, nor had he noticed she was wearing her black dress.

'I mean to put in five days' work with Papin on the *Françoise* to start with, and we begin to-day.'

Only when he went to get his cup of coffee from the table and he saw his sister's black gloves and Prayer-Book lying on the table-cloth did it dawn on him.

'Oh, it's Sunday - I'd forgotten,' he mumbled, reddening.

'Go and get dressed. And hurry up, or we'll be late for Mass.'

'I shall go to the Cathedral.'

'Please yourself ... I suppose you've your reasons,' she added meaningly.

Meanwhile Françoise, who always went to early service so as to look after the shop, which remained open on Sunday mornings, was up in her room, changing her clothes.

'Really it's too ridiculous!' Céline exclaimed as she took her gloves.

'What's ridiculous?'

'*You* are! You stand there like a great gawk of a school-boy who's done something wrong and is afraid of being scolded.'

Of course *she* was devoted to him, in her way. She watched him walking up the stairs, and only when he was out of sight did she lower her eyes and fall into a brown study.

Guérec had a disappointing day. As he'd announced, he went to High Mass at the Cathedral, but saw no sign of Marie. Quite likely she never went to church. Most of the factory workers at Concarneau had dropped religion.

His promise to call in at eight that morning was on his mind. Had she guessed that when he made it he'd forgotten the next day was a Sunday?

Instinctively he walked towards the Rue de l'Épargne after the service. There was a group of young folks at the corner, talking and laughing. A cold wind was blowing; it looked like snow. In the Cathedral they had already started fitting up the big beribboned crib which was to figure in the Christmas festival.

The door of the cottage was shut, the curtains were drawn. He rang the bell rather nervously, and listened. There was no

sound within. As he was walking away, the door of the next house opened.

'Did you want Marie Papin?'

'Yes. I'll come back later.'

'She won't be back till to-night. They've all gone to her uncle's at Rosporden. Can I give a message?'

'Thanks - no.'

To tell the truth, he was rather relieved. There was now a restful day before him in the cosy downstairs room where every Sunday some of his fellow-skipperers dropped in for a glass or two of brandy and stayed gossiping round the stove. They'd discuss the prospects of the deep-sea season, the relations between the fishing and the canning industries - which were growing constantly more strained - and the latest move of the Seamen's Union, which, too, was on the warpath.

It was the Sunday of the month on which they always had rabbit for lunch, and in the afternoon Françoise would produce one of her celebrated home-made cakes.

Thinking of all this as he walked back, he had a twinge of remorse. What business had he to upset their comfortable, tranquil home-life, to play havoc with his sisters' peace of mind as he knew he now was doing?

To get himself forgiven he entered the room whistling, and to prove he had really been to Mass remarked to Céline:

'The crib's almost finished ... We'll have snow this afternoon.'

Then, tomorrow ... ? All sorts of ideas were running in his head, but he kept his own counsel, smiling to himself.

CHAPTER IV

THE snow held only, in a thin, speckled layer, on patches of bare ground and in the crevices between the cobbles of the

streets. But it went on falling, slowly, softly, soundlessly, vanishing at once in the dark waters of the harbour.

When Guérec rang the bell he saw the milkman on the step of the adjoining house handing some change to the woman who had addressed him the day before. There was a sound of footsteps, and the door opened.

'My brother's ready,' Marie said, without asking him to come in. 'Philippe! He's here.'

At the end of the passage was a pail, the kitchen door stood open, a broom was propped against the table, which was littered with household utensils and, in one corner, the remains of an early breakfast.

'Hurry up, Philippe!'

'Oh, you needn't rush him,' Guérec protested amiably.

But, instead of showing gratitude for his consideration, she almost scowled at him. Evidently something had put her in a temper. And he noticed, too, that she was looking ill, her cheeks were pinched and grey.

'What work are you going to put him at?'

She sounded almost suspicious. He was giving work to a half-wit whom nobody else would employ and, instead of being grateful, she treated him like someone with dark designs on the unfortunate young man!

'Oh, there are plenty of odd jobs to do on board. I'll be with him most of the time.'

'I only mentioned it, as he shouldn't overtire himself.'

How right his sisters were! He was painfully conscious of it at this moment, for it ~~wasn't~~ ^{wasn't} his place to be standing on a doorstep waiting for a young fellow to whom he'd given a job. Nor was it for him to be going into details, giving explanations. And it was even more undignified to be craning his neck, like a Peeping Tom, to see what the house was like inside.

Most absurd of all was the chocolate! ... For he'd brought

a big slab of chocolate cream for the child. Though there were sweets of all kinds at his sisters' shop, he had bought it on the Quai de l'Aiguillon.

'Is your little boy in?'

'No, he's gone to school.'

'I've just discovered some chocolate in my pocket. I wonder if he'd like it?'

After all, wasn't it natural enough if she shot him a suspicious glance? Was a middle-aged man likely to 'discover' a bar of chocolate cream, with its wrappings intact, in a pocket of his working kit?

'Hullo, Philippe!'

Philippe gave Guérec a smile and a grunt by way of greeting, while Marie began to close the door. At the last moment something prompted Guérec to ask in a low tone:

'I say, may I drop in one day and see the little boy?'

'Certainly, if you want to.'

At last the door closed. The woman next door had seen him; so, no doubt, had others. He had waited on the doorstep like the milkman or butcher's boy.

Walking at Philippe's side, he was struck by the almost animal liteness of the youngster's gait. He loped along soundlessly and seemed to displace no air; yet he had lanky, rather clumsily built limbs.

Evidently, too, he used his brain, such as it was, for no sooner had they reached the water-front than he started dragging Guérec's dinghy down to the water, of his own initiative - which showed he recognized it as Guérec's. Also without waiting to be told, he put the oar in place, and it was he who did the sculling.

Really, Marie Papin had been quite unamiable, and Guérec felt convinced she had tossed the bar of chocolate amongst the litter on the kitchen table without giving another thought to it. What did she make of him? Very likely she thought he

really needed Philippe, and for that reason was trying to ingratiate himself with her. But he had nothing to go on, no means of guessing what she thought.

Just then a new idea waylaid him, and he was actually blushing as he stepped across the rail of one of his ketches and made fast the dinghy alongside. Did she think he'd fallen in love with her? His sisters, anyhow, would certainly come to that conclusion. That might explain why she had been so stand-offish with him.

Philippe, who seemed quite at home on board ship, climbed down promptly into the fo'c'sle galley and pointed to the small cast-iron stove, making uncouth noises:

'Mah. Moo. Foo-ah.'

Guérec guessed what he was trying to say, and answered:

'Yes, that's right. You can light the fire. There's coal behind that door.'

The snow on deck was melting. Sounds of hammering could be heard on another boat, the fourth or fifth away. Guérec had so far no idea what they were going to do all day; finally he brought down to the fo'c'sle two boxes of tools, most of them very much rusted. Then he fetched some grease, and the two of them settled down to cleaning the tools and smearing them with grease.

The more he thought about it, the more he suspected he was acting like a fool, and he blamed himself for resenting Céline's attitude. Nevertheless, unreasonable as it was, he couldn't help feeling vexed with her.

Even more bitterly he reproached himself for having let his life become involved in a tangle of lies and deceit; for pretending to be ill, taking unneeded medicines and following a diet; for his moodiness at home, his furtive visits to the Rue de l'Épargne - not to mention that ridiculous bar of chocolate he'd fished out of his pocket this morning ...

At noon, having ascertained that Philippe had brought his midday meal with him, he went on shore alone. On entering

the house he watched his sisters from the corner of an eye, but neither took any special notice of him, and to his surprise Céline, deliberately no doubt, refrained from asking what he had been up to all the morning. All she said was:

‘The man from Rennes will be here at two, about the engine.’

So he had to change his clothes, interview the agent of the firm which was supplying the motor-engine for the *Marthe*, and go with him to Argentin’s shipyard, where for two hours they discussed details of the installation. Most of their talk centred on the pump, for it was the water-feed that had always given trouble in the other ketches. He sent for his engineer, who also had a long confabulation with the man from Rennes. Meanwhile he could see a ribbon of smoke rising from one of his two boats moored in the centre of the harbour, and the sight called up a picture of the cosy little cabin in the fo’c’sle, and Philippe squatting on the floor emery-papering the tools and coating them with grease.

*

The scene took place on Christmas Eve. The wind had turned, sweeping away the snow-clouds, and a south-wester had set in, drenching the town with rain-squalls, hurling great waves against the breakwaters and causing the boats moored side by side in the harbour to rock so violently that fenders had had to be put out.

For these last two days there had been great excitement in the town and people had been watching with field-glasses the desperate efforts of a tramp-steamer to avert disaster. Unable to enter the harbour, she had cast anchor in the roads, but the anchor-chains had snapped three times and she had all but piled up on Gabelou Head.

The rescue had taken place on the twenty-fourth, at ten in the morning. Everyone had gone to the sea-front to watch the efforts of the little tug which had been sent from Garric

for that purpose. Now and again a towering wave would crash upon the breakwater, always at the same point, and a deep pool had formed there.

All the owners of fishing-boats had gathered on the breakwater and were discussing the usual topic: the prospects of the approaching tunny season and their negotiations with the managers of the canning factories. The latter had refused to make any concession whatsoever and, moreover, were threatening to close down if the Government did not put an embargo on imports from Portugal.

Floundering through heavy seas, the little tug wormed its way towards the steamer, which was dragging her anchor again. It was a tricky business getting a line aboard her.

Only at one did the tug enter the harbour, proudly towing a ship a hundred times her size. The cargo-boat was Greek. Little attention was given to the crew, a dirty, half-starved lot.

His sisters had already started lunch when Guérec got home, and Celine was dressed for going out.

'I want you to take me to Quimper,' she said to her brother
'In the car, you mean?'

'I do. Really it's absurd, leaving it in the garage all the time. You've got your new driving-licence, haven't you?'

'Yes, but I don't feel like taking the car out.'

Nerves bad?'

'Put it that way if you like. Anyhow, I don't want to drive to Quimper on a Christmas Eve, when the road is swarming with motor-coaches. It's bad enough on ordinary days, with all those hairpin bends.'

'I can see I'll have to learn to drive,' she muttered.

Relations between them had been rather strained for several days. Guérec was conscious that Céline had him under observation, and that irritated him, especially now that he really had something to hide.

For he had been to Marie's house three times more. On each occasion he had fought against the impulse, but to no

avail, and he had trumped up specious pretexts to salve his conscience.

The first time was on a Saturday, when his excuse had been the payment of Philippe's wages for the week. She had had to ask him into the kitchen to give him his change.

'Are you satisfied with him?' She eyed him shrewdly.

'Rather! He's doing very well.'

'Really?'

That evidently surprised her. And the truth was that Philippe's work didn't amount to much. When Guérec was there they did small jobs together, and the youngster showed himself willing enough. But when left to himself he would spend hours staring at the fire, day-dreaming; or else he would lay fishing-lines round the boat and squat on deck gazing dully at the water.

'Yes, he's a good lad,' Guérec added.

The small boy came home while he was there, and Guérec had more chocolate for him.

'Say "Thank you",' his mother ordered, but half-heartedly.

'Thank you.'

The child was even more aloof than Marie, and stubbornly resisted Guérec's attempts to draw him out.

'Have you been to see the Christ-child's crib? It's a very pretty one this year.'

Without replying, the boy looked at his mother as if asking for a lead. She answered for him.

'No. He's not gone yet.'

'And what would you like Father Christmas to bring you?'

Again the boy made no answer. There was an obstinate look on his face, and he was fumbling with the chocolate as if he had no idea what the wrapper contained. Guérec had an impression he was on the brink of tears.

'His brother had more to say for himself,' Marie remarked.

'He was like him in looks, wasn't he?'

'Yes, but his nature was quite different. It's always the

nicest on whom trouble comes'... Here's your change. Won't you have a cup of coffee?'

She proposed it merely out of politeness, and he knew he was expected to decline. But he said 'Thanks' all the same, so she had to poke the fire and boil a kettle – which she did with a bad grace.

'Will you be doing any inshore fishing this winter?'

'No, I don't expect to.'

'I hear you're having a new boat built, and it will do eight knots.'

'That's so. And if your brother goes on working as well as he does now, I hope to have him in my crew.'

The kitchen was clean; beyond it was a scullery opening on a little yard where washing hung on a line.

'What I'd really like,' Marie suddenly remarked, 'is to be given your washing. There must be lots of things to wash at your place. Your sisters still wear the Breton head-dress, don't they?'

'Yes, except the one who's married.'

But he didn't dare to promise anything, and indeed he'd never dare even to propose this to his sisters. Their washing was given to an old woman who lived next door, and they always did the ironing at home. Nevertheless he said:

'I'll speak to them about it.'

'Say I never use any chemicals, and I don't charge more than anyone else ... Two lumps of sugar?'

He was conscious that something about her disappointed him, though what it was he couldn't say exactly. It was rather like what he found in her son: a sort of listlessness, a lack of interest in anything, that made itself felt in all she said and did – now, for instance, in the half-hearted way in which she was entertaining him. He could see his visits gave her no pleasure – probably the reverse; very likely she found them disconcerting and kept wondering what he could be after, what was at the back of his mind.

'Does Philippe really work?' she asked.

'Of course he does.'

Anyhow, he lit the fire every day and always had a can of coffee simmering on the stove.

Three days later Guérec came again, on the pretext of wanting to ask Philippe where he had put the key of the store-locker. Actually the key was in his, Guérec's, pocket.

The light was on in the kitchen. Marie was ironing, while her son sat on a tattered grey cushion on the floor.

'You've not told me yet what you'd like Father Christmas to bring you.'

The child stared at him blankly, as if the words conveyed no meaning. Guérec turned to Marie.

'Shall you be going to the Watch-night service?'

'No, I shan't.'

'We always go, I and my sisters.'

'It's different for you.'

There was an undertone of bitterness in her voice, the grievance of the poor against well-to-do folk like the Guérecs, who had a grocery, two fishing-boats, and another on the slips.

When he got home, Céline promptly asked him where he had been.

'Oh, my watch was out of order and I'd given it to the watchmaker on the Quai de l'Aiguillon. I went to get it back.'

For he never failed to have a cast-iron alibi planned in advance.

'Did you come back by the Rue de l'Aiguillon?'

'No, I came the long way round. I always do that now, as I need exercise.'

She knew! Somebody must have told her he'd been visiting Marie Papin's cottage. No doubt people were talking about it, and he could guess the conclusion they must be drawing.

A wrong conclusion. Guérec had none of the intentions they presumably attributed to him. Still, he had to admit it,

the little boy's death was occupying his thoughts much less than before.

It was all so very different from what he'd pictured. He had expected to see a woman in deep mourning, her eyes red with weeping, haunted at every moment by memories of her dead son. And when he'd asked her whether she had gone to the graveyard on the previous Sunday she had said 'No' quite coolly; no, she'd been too busy!

True, she mentioned the dead child now and again, but always to make comparisons between him and her surviving son, especially when she was scolding him.

'Joe behaved much better,' she would remind him. And even added on one occasion: 'If you go on being naughty you'll end up like your brother!'

Not that she meant to be unkind; but she was built that way – there was no 'nonsense' about her. She never stopped working, never saw anybody, and – Guérec felt sure – never laughed or even smiled. When he called she always made him feel like an intruder.

On this New Year's Eve Céline took the bus to Quimper, after once again asking her brother to drive her there in the car, or, if he wouldn't do that, to come with her.

'Sorry, I've some people to see.'

'About the new boat?'

'Yes. I think they're going to alter the position of the tanks.'

He would gladly have had the whole lay-out changed just to have pretexts for going out and explanations ready when he came home.

What he actually did was to go to the shopping street and enter a big general stores, where he had the bad luck to run into a woman, a neighbour of theirs, who was buying toys. He had to wait till she had left the shop, as he too intended to buy toys, and wouldn't have been able to explain whom they were for.

He had no idea what sort of games a boy of six fancies;

hoping for the best, he bought a box of building bricks, a small wooden horse, and a clockwork motor-car. Then he went across the street to a confectioner's and bought some ginger-bread and a big box of sweets.

He didn't dare to get anything for Marie, much as he'd have liked to do so. Still, he felt sure that one day she would become more human; that what she showed him now was not her real character.

He waited till it was dark before going, laden with parcels, to the Rue de l'Épargne.

'Oh, it's you!' said Marie as she opened the door. A smell of black-pudding hung in the little hall.

Suddenly he had a fear some other man was in the house. This was the first time such a thought had crossed his mind, and he stared anxiously down the passage into the kitchen, the air in which was thick with smoke and steam. But he could see only the little boy there, tracing pothooks on a slate.

'I've brought him a few toys.'

'Edgar! Do you hear? He's brought you something.'

Edgar said nothing, but gazed wide-eyed at the toys Guerec was unwrapping; then suddenly his lips quivered and he began to sob.

'It's only that he's startled,' Marie explained. 'He's never seen so many toys in his life. Really you shouldn't have done it.'

'Why not?'

'It's too much for one child.'

'Not a bit of it. I've no children of my own, and I'm only too delighted to be able ...'

'That's so - you aren't married.'

He blushed, and settled awkwardly into a chair beside the table. This evening surely he might stay on a bit. They were almost friends!

'I've brought half a dozen cigars for your brother. I didn't dare to bring anything for you.'

'Oh, I, you know – presents aren't in my line.'

'You're feeling sad, I'm afraid.'

'Well, there isn't much to be cheerful about, is there?'

'That's so. I understand ...'

Clearly, she too had the dead child in mind, for she made haste to explain:

'Yes – but it isn't only that.'

Then she lifted the black-pudding from the saucepan in which it had been simmering, giving off a pungent smell of herbs and spices.

'Would you be offended if I asked you your age?'

'Oh, I don't mind your knowing. I'm twenty-two.'

'So your children were born when you were only seven teen.'

'Does that surprise you? I know a girl at the factory who had a baby when she was thirteen. What do you expect in a place like this?'

Somehow the remark made him uncomfortable and, not daring to ask her any more questions, he turned to the little boy, who was rubbing his eyes.

'Still not been to see the crib? Don't you want to see it?'

As usual, no response. Marie was busy at the range. Smilingly he asked:

'How about coming with me to the Cathedral, Edgar? I'll show you the Christ-child, the donkey, and the ox – all sorts of pretty things.'

Marie looked up from her saucepans.

'I don't think he'll go with you. He's awfully shy.'

She made no more effort to keep him that evening than on any of his previous visits. Indeed, it looked as if it were an effort for her to endure his presence. She allowed him here on sufferance – no more than that.

Why then did he stay? And why rack his brains for friendly remarks to make, and excuses for remaining?

'Won't you be taking your boats out at all this winter?' she asked after some minutes' silence.

'I hardly think so. The inshore fishing doesn't pay. The fish is sold too cheap.'

'Not for those who buy it.'

'I mean, it doesn't cover expenses.'

'And so you keep your boats laid up. So much the worse for the crews who're out of a job!'

For the moment he was rather annoyed by the remark; then he saw it gave a clue to her general attitude. She bore him a grudge because he was an employer of labour, a 'capitalist' in a small way. He owned three fishing-boats, a shop, a café, and it was common knowledge that the Guérecs had money in the bank.

'Well, I might try taking the *Françoise* out in January.'

'You know, you mustn't take any notice of what I say. You needn't do it on my account. It was very decent of you to give work to my brother, who can't be really of much use. Do your sisters know you come here sometimes?'

'Well ...' He couldn't think how to continue, and fell to wondering how he stood in the opinion of the towns-people. They could hardly help knowing that Céline had the whip-hand in the Guérec establishment, and could be a Tartar on occasion. Probably some of them jeered at him behind his back, called him the hen-pecked brother!

And of course everybody in the town had heard of the 'old business', that misadventure with Germaine.

At last he forced himself to say:

'Yes, they know.'

'And don't they ask you why you keep on coming here?'

An indirect way, perhaps, of asking him that question on her own account.

'No. They know I'm fond of children, and as I haven't any of my own ...' He was conscious of the lameness of the explanation, but it was the best he could think up.

'Isn't your sister going to have a baby soon?'

'I see you know all about my family.'

'Oh, just like everybody else. When my son was killed I had to go to the police station several times, and Monsieur Gloaguen was most kind. One day he thought he'd found out the car that did it, but it seems the owner lives at Paimpol and his car stayed in the garage all that day.'

She went on working as she spoke, moving about the kitchen, while Edgar stayed sulking in a corner.

'He's a very clever man.'

'Who?'

'Monsieur Gloaguen. He told me exactly what to do if the owner of the car was caught. It seems I might make him pay a lot of money. But suppose it's someone who hasn't got any ...?'

Her voice had the tone of weary resignation and indifference which was habitual with her whatever she was talking about. Nevertheless, Guérec always had an impression that this languor was only on the surface; at any moment she might shake it off and become like other women. If, for example, he could get her to smile – if only for an instant – it would be like the turning of a key; she would come alive.

She had delicately moulded features and her eyes were a very pale blue, more translucent than any eyes he had ever seen before. She was slim without being thin, and he found the shape of her lips, full and slightly pouting, singularly attractive.

'Is Philippe still on board?'

'I really don't know. I didn't say anything about it, but he should know that he can knock off earlier on Christmas Eve.'

Anyhow, there was some progress; she spoke to him of her own accord and no longer seemed to resent his presence in the house. At this moment Céline was rushing from shop to shop at Quimper; probably, as she did every year, she would buy for him a pair of leather slippers and a scarf for Sunday.

It was high time for him, too, to set about his Christmas shopping.

'So you won't come to the midnight service?'

'Why should I go, considering I never go to the other services?'

'Bye-bye, kiddie, and a Merry Christmas. What? You don't want me to kiss you?'

No; the child turned his head away. Guérec took his leave from Marie rather abruptly and returned to the centre of the town, which was crowded with shoppers. He meant to give his sisters exceptionally handsome presents this year by way of propitiating them, and he bought a vanity-bag for Céline that cost eighty francs, and for Françoise a small gold brooch.

For Gloaguen cigars were indicated. There remained Marthe, and at first he was at a loss; finally he decided on a baby's bonnet, though he'd a feeling he might be making a bloomer!

When he entered the house, hiding the parcels behind his back, he found Céline already back. As he walked across the downstairs room his sisters pretended not to notice he had anything with him, for the presents were never given till after Midnight Mass.

But he was struck by the fact that neither of them said a word to him. After depositing the parcels in his bedroom he came down again and, by way of breaking the ice, enquired of Céline:

'Were there many people at Quimper?'

Without looking towards him, she retorted:

'Marie Papin wasn't there - if that's what you mean.'

'Why ever do you say that?' He tried to assume a bantering tone.

'If she'd been at Quimper you wouldn't have spent the afternoon of Christmas Eve at her place instead of staying with your family.' And Céline rose and marched off towards the kitchen, where Françoise was cooking the dinner.

'Really, I don't follow ...'

She halted at the kitchen door.

'Don't act the fool, Jules. You know quite well what I mean.'

'I'm not acting the fool, and I don't see why you should talk to me in that tone. It's quite true I looked up Marie Papin – because I take an interest in those poor people: they've had rotten luck, you know, and ...'

'Yes, she had the rotten luck of getting twins by a man no one's ever set eyes on, and I dare say she –'

'That's enough!'

'Why shouldn't I speak my mind if I feel like it? If you're so keen on helping hard-luck cases, I know a poor old woman who's paralysed, and all she has to live on is sixty francs a month from the Relief Committee. She lives in the Old Town and I can give you her address. Why not take some presents to her as well, if you're in such a charitable mood?'

'Who told you I'd given them presents?'

'Do you really think you're not seen when you go to that cottage, and that people aren't wondering why you spend so much time there?'

The kitchen door was open and Françoise could hear every word, but she thought better not to take part in the conversation.

'Well, what's the harm in it anyway? I own I took some toys for that poor kid, but I swear I bought nothing for his mother.'

'I dare say. And the mere fact you say that shows you thought of it but didn't dare.'

Which was indeed the truth. Céline had an uncanny gift of reading his thoughts, and at such moments he almost hated her.

'And you're not only making a laughing-stock of yourself; your men are grumbling. If you really think a watchman's needed on the boats – though they've managed quite well

without one hitherto – you might at least have given the job to one of your old crew. Several of them have large families to provide for.’

‘So Philippe hasn’t a right to earn his living like other people!’

An absurd retort, but Guérec’s nerves were on edge and he said the first thing that came into his head. He had quite forgotten it was Christmas Eve and the Gloaguens would be turning up presently for a festive evening *en famille*, which would end with a mutual exchange of presents.

‘Listen, Jules! I’ve as much brains as you have, and you know it. I didn’t say anything to you the other day when you lost your wallet at Quimper – or, rather, had it stolen from you by some woman. I know men can’t help being like that, though it’s a disgusting habit ...’

He chuckled to himself, thinking of what he’d really done with his wallet. So even Céline, who prided herself on her omniscience, could be hoodwinked!

‘Carry on!’ he said quite cheerfully: ‘I’m listening.’

‘Yes, I said nothing then; but I’m not going to let you make a fool of yourself again as you did over Germaine. Father and mother struggled hard to earn the money they left us, and it would be a disgrace to let it pass into the hands of creatures like –’

‘Stop! I forbid you ...’

‘Forbid me indeed! But of course you *would* stick up for her against your sister. That woman! Why, you don’t even really know her ... I can’t think what’s come over you.’

‘Nothing’s come over me.’

‘Since you started going to her place you’ve been quite different, and I’m pretty sure it’s on her account that you haven’t gone out this year for the inshore fishing. It would break your heart, of course, to have to let two or three days go by without your seeing her.’

‘You’re wrong there!’

'Really?'

'Yes. As it so happens, I'm taking the *Françoise* out in a few days' time.'

'So you've had a tiff with her?'

'Not a bit of it. But I've had enough of being badgered about by you. I'm not a small boy, I'm a man of forty. And I've a master's ticket. I'd like to know who's in charge of the boats – you or I?'

'You're being ridiculous.'

'And you – there are times when your selfishness is ... simply revolting! Well, that's all I had to say. Good night.'

He stormed up to his bedroom, barricaded the door with a chair, and listened intently. After a quarter of an hour someone came up the stairs. It was Marthe, who had just arrived with her husband and been deputed to act as peacemaker.

'Jules! It's me. Let me in.'

He opened the door.

'Well, what do you want?'

'Listen, Jules! It would be downright mean of you to spoil our Christmas Eve like that. Remember what it meant when we were children.'

To save his face he waited a moment before moving.

'Come along. We're just going to start dinner.'

He followed her sulkily down the stairs, carrying the parcels. After depositing them on a chair near the door he shook hands with Gloaguen, who was sporting a new suit.

'Take your places,' said Françoise. 'I've made a real old-fashioned black-pudding. I hope it'll be as good as mother's were; I used her recipe.'

It reminded him of the other black-pudding he'd seen that evening. Then his gaze settled on Céline, and his anger died when he saw her eyes red with weeping.

But why must she be *always* in the right?

He joined in the conversation, and by the end of the meal was almost cheerful. All the same, he had a mild revenge when

he dumped his parcels down on the table and, instead of handing out the presents individually, said rather grumpily: 'There you are! Help yourselves.'

But of course his sisters knew him so well that they guessed at once for whom each article was intended.

And as for him, he couldn't do less than wear his new scarf, Céline's present, when they set out for the Midnight Mass.

CHAPTER V

THE little stove was roaring away merrily in the fo'c'sle, and Philippe beaming with delight. Once the net had been set and the sails trimmed, only one man stayed on deck. The others, huddled round the stove below, had occasional glimpses of him when the hatch opened, huge and shapeless as a modernistic statue in his oilskins, under which were three layers of woollen garments.

Days and nights were all the same, and the sequence of the hours no longer counted. Life on board went to the rhythm of the trawl, the periods of dragging along the bottom of the sea and of hauling in.

As the men came down the hatchway from the deck they brought a rush of water with them along the iron ladder, at the foot of which a brackish pool had formed. No sooner had a man put his foot on the top rung than he was hailed by a shout: 'Hurry up and close that blasted hatch!'

For all the good heat was rushing out by it. Instinctively everyone went straight to the stove, held out his hands to its warmth, then rubbed them vigorously.

Some members of the crew, old Durieu, for instance, never took off their seaboots once during the four or five days they were at sea.

Others, leaning back against their bunks, got their mates to help them.

‘Haul! Harder! ... Ow!’

Then vigorously rubbed their numbed and aching feet.

Guérec shared the life of his men. He had a sort of cubby-hole aft, but as it was hardly bigger than a grave and there was no way of heating it, he preferred to stay in the fo’c’sle cabin with the others.

They were eight all told, including Philippe. The trawler never went far from land, but cruised about in Audierne Bay, or off the Ile de Croix, according to the wind. For three or four days they dragged on, or near, the sea-bottom with the big trawling net, until they had taken enough to fill the fish-boxes.

Everyone brought his own rations, according to his taste. Some lived on bread and cold sausage; others got Philippe to cook hot meals, of a sort, for them. Old Durieu had his own idea of what to eat at sea; he would take a live fish, chop off its head, and gnaw the raw flesh with every sign of pleasure.

As, puffing at their pipes, they drowsed over the stove, some went sound asleep. Occasionally someone would look up and through half-closed eyes watch Guérec putting on his patched oilskins and starting up the ladder. After that his footsteps could be heard as he paced the deck overhead.

They knew what that meant. In a few minutes he’d be shouting down the hatch:

‘Come along, my lads!’

The first movements were always the most unwelcome. One by one they struggled to their posts, at the windlass, or the halyards, or beside the rails.

Nothing could be seen except white swathes of sea-mist, more or less opaque – ‘sea blancmange’ as one of the men described it.

‘Haul O!’

It took a good quarter of an hour drawing in the net, which

presently could be seen heaving and writhing alongside like a huge jelly-fish. After it had been worked on board with purchase-tackle, they tipped the bag over on to the deck, which was soon alive with scurrying crabs and a sprawling, slithering mass of fish, all gaping at the same moment.

While the net was being drawn in, the larger rents were hastily patched up by two of the crew. Guérec had a look at the haul, then at the sea, and decided where next to cast the trawl, while the men sorted out the fish, threw refuse overboard, and packed soles and turbot in small boxes between layers of ice.

The deck was rapidly sluiced down, and a moment later there was a general rush to the hatchway – back to the warmth of the fire, and sleep.

This was their second venture. The first, which had lasted three days, had been fairly successful; the men had got over two hundred francs a head as their share. They were now working in the trawl for the third time this trip. An icy wind was blowing and the sea running high.

Whenever Guérec wasn't with his men in the fo'c'sle, he remained squatting in the engine-room, where it was nearly as warm. He had a reason for that. Ballanec, his engineer, who lived near Marie, had said to him one day with an innocent air:

'She's a queer one, ain't she?'

'Who do you mean?'

'Why, Marie, o' coursel' His eyes were twinkling.

Ballanec, too, was 'a queer one' in his way; he was at once the fattest and, for all that, the most agile man on board. Day in, day out, he got through the best part of a pint of brandy and, though never strictly sober, was never drunk.

What he didn't know about oil-engines wasn't worth knowing. He had a way of severely eyeing that of the *François* as if to warn it:

'Don't you try any larks with me, old girl!'

He would talk to his engine, coax it, pat it with a spanner, dope it up, and he always got it to do what he wanted, cross-grained and decrepit as it was after many years' hard service.

'Ain't your sisters said nothing about it yet, Jules?'

They called each other by their Christian names. In any case, Ballanec did that to everyone, even comparative strangers; it was one of his foibles.

The first time he mentioned Marie, Guérec had frowned and changed the subject. But next day it was he himself who brought it up. And after that he had got into the way of crouching for hours on end in the cramped little engine-room, under the green-glimmering decklight, in a reek of hot oil and bilge-water.

'Do you know her well?'

'It's my missus who knows her best; they come from the same village, Pleuven, near Fousenant. Marie was born there. They were an unlucky family, that's sure. Her father now – do you know about him?'

'He's dead, isn't he?'

'Yes, but how did he die? He wasn't a fisherman. He was a small farmer with a bit of land of his own. One day when he'd had a drop too much he started bullyragging his farm-hand, a lad of sixteen. And what do you think the young rascal did? Jabbed him with a pitchfork right in the eye, and poor old Papin died in hospital some days later. I expect the youngster's still in jail, doing his term – and serve him right. Next year Marie's mother died of the 'flu. And now Marie's kid's been run over ... Aye, there's some folks born unlucky.'

'Know who the father of her kids was?'

'Nobody knows. I dare say she don't know herself. Not that she's any flightier than lots of the girls are nowadays ... No, I wouldn't say that of her.'

What of all this stuck most in Guérec's mind was the remark: 'There's some folk born unlucky.'

He had plenty of time to muse on it between two shootings

of the net, but it was hard to set order in his thoughts when his ears were buzzing with the thudding of the engine, his eyes smarting, and his limbs aching with fatigue.

Philippe seemed to have developed a dog-like devotion for Guérec, and was always coming up to him, at all hours of the day and night, with a glass of hot wine or a handful of roast chestnuts. When the skipper took off his seaboots – ordinary wooden clogs with leather uppers – Philippe always put hot cinders inside them, which scorched the wood a little. After some minutes he tipped the cinders out into the sea, and the boots were dry and warm when Guérec put them on again.

A puzzling lad, Philippe. At times one almost thought that it was only his defective speech that made him seem a half-wit, for he didn't behave like one.

On one occasion when Guérec happened to take his wallet from his pocket, the youngster's face split in a large grin and he pointed first at the wallet, then across the sea towards Concarneau.

'What's the joke?' Guérec asked rather irritably.

Nothing abashed, Philippe signed to him to open the wallet; then tapped one of the compartments. It was the one containing Marie's photograph.

Philippe was bubbling over with delight, rubbing his hands, chuckling to himself, and, to crown everything, he started blowing kisses towards the coast.

'So you've been looking through my wallet, have you?'

Philippe nodded; evidently he saw nothing wrong in doing that. Wasn't it he who looked after all his employer's things? And evidently he was tickled by the thought that Guérec was in love.

It was one of the small photos used on passports, and a poor likeness at that. Guérec had acquired it by a pure fluke. Before setting out on the first fishing cruise, on January 3, he had visited Marie, as he required Philippe's identity papers for production at the Seaboard Conscription office.

Marie had greeted him in her usual manner, without showing any pleasure or otherwise at his coming.

'Sit down,' she said, when he explained the object of his visit.

She went up to her bedroom and presently came down with a big, battered attaché-case.

'What exactly do you want? His birth-certificate?'

'Yes, that'll do.'

The attaché-case was chock-full of papers, and some photographs dropped out when she opened it. Guérec picked them up and paused to examine one of them.

'May I keep this?' It was a photograph of Marie.

'What do you want to do with it?'

'Oh, nothing ...'

'Then - why?' She wasn't teasing him, and there was nothing coquettish in her manner.

'Do let me have it.'

'Please yourself!' She shrugged her shoulders and went on hunting for the birth-certificate.

'By the way,' she said, 'he can't swim. Please see he doesn't get into danger.'

'I'll look after him, I promise you.'

At that time he didn't know if he was in love with her; even now he was not sure. And even if he had been sure, he would have been quite unable to say *why* he loved her.

On board ship, he could see things in perspective; the atmosphere was so different. And now it struck him that whenever he thought about Concarneau it wasn't a picture of his home, his sisters and his childhood that rose in his mind but one of Marie's little kitchen.

Why? As things stood now, it couldn't be on account of the child whom he had killed accidentally. Nor assuredly on account of Edgar, who was almost as shy and hostile as he had been at the start, and always made a face when his mother told him to shake hands

Then again Marie wasn't really pretty, and she showed no pleasure in his visits, but seemed indeed more bored by them than otherwise. Nor had she a spark of gratitude for anything, for his attentions to her, his presents, or even his kindness to Philippe.

'There's some folks born unlucky,' Ballanec had said.

Ballanec was gazing at him now, puffing away at his wheezy black pipe, but with unseeing eyes most likely, for he seemed to be in a brown study. He had three children, and rumour said he beat them every night, out of principle, or habit. Otherwise he was the mildest of men.

Did he beat his wife too? Guérec wondered. Likely as not he did.

'Yes, that's so,' he said at last in a brooding voice. 'She's had no luck in life.'

'Aye, and when the luck's against one, there's no getting away from it. Look at me, for instance. If I hadn't gone and got married I'd have been an engineer officer by now. I'd started studying at the training-school and was all set for it. Then one fine day I met a blasted woman and all that was up the spout.'

With Guérec it had been quite otherwise; so much so that it sometimes made him uneasy. For, however far he looked back in his life, it seemed that luck had always favoured him.

In fact, he had been born under a lucky star. For one thing, his parents were very well off by local standards. As a school-boy he'd never known what it was to be thinly clad in winter, and he'd been the best dressed of all at the Confirmation service.

And it had gone on like that. Most sailors look back on their 'prentice days, their first storm, their first experience of hauling in a net, with detestation, and have a sorry tale to tell of bullying, insults, ropes' ends. But for him, as the skipper's son, it had been plain sailing. When they gave him a dressing-down it had been only for form's sake.

In 1914 most of his friends had been sent on service off the Flanders coast. One of them had been in three shipwrecks, another had spent six days adrift in an open boat; several had been drowned. For Guérec, however, the war had been almost literally a picnic.

Along with a hundred others he had been brought before a naval officer who asked a couple of questions, then, turning to his clerk, uttered a word Guérec had failed to understand.

After that, while the others were sent for training on a battleship, he was given orders to report for duty at Toulon. It was the first time he had been South, and the sight of the Mediterranean coast bathed in sunshine in mid-winter made him gasp.

Two months later he sailed in a net-layer, and he spent the next three years on board her in the Adriatic, where they never even sighted an enemy ship.

It was almost too good to be true, cushy beyond his wildest dreams. He had no work worth mentioning, lashings of wine to drink, frequent jaunts ashore and fishing trips.

Sometimes there was talk of submarines, but none came their way. After laying their nets across the narrows, all they had to do was to keep watch on them, and during his three years in the Adriatic the war hardly touched him.

Then there had come his entanglement with Germaine - 'that old business', as his sisters called it. But for them he'd have given in tamely, put his neck in the noose, partly through fear of scandal, partly out of pity for the girl, with whom he had never really been in love. Thanks to his sisters he had escaped what would certainly have been a disastrous marriage.

Yes, for him anyhow, things had always gone smoothly; he had been born lucky, in fact! He had lost only one boat - four years ago - and not one of the crew had gone down with her. And, more amazing still, the insurance company had actually paid up more than was needed to replace her.

But now, thinking about Marie, he felt a little thrill of fear,

fear of the unknown future. On shore he hadn't supposed he was in love, but here, at sea, he had to admit this much – that all his thoughts turned on her.

He missed her. At sea one always pictures the place where one would wish to be. By rights he should have pictured his sisters' house, so clean and comfortable, in which every object was a tried, familiar friend.

Instead of that, what hovered persistently before him was that poky little kitchen, where he wasn't even welcome, where he sat down without being asked, while Marie went about her tasks, paying little or no attention to what he said.

He knew he was giving rise to gossip; that every time he saw her he was in for bitterly reproachful looks from Céline and Françoise when he came home. And he knew, too, that things would go from bad to worse, and one day inevitably there would be serious trouble.

Why then did he persist in visiting her? She didn't even like, much less love, him. Indeed, he stood for everything she disliked; he was well off, an employer of labour, a 'capitalist.'

Suppose, however, she consented to become his mistress? The mere thought of it brought the blood to his cheeks, but it was a thought that seldom came to him. Sometimes, however, it did come, especially when he was crouching in the small, stuffy engine-room with the chug-chug of the motor throbbing in his ears. When all was said and done, that might well be the easiest solution; to have her for his mistress, for a short while or a long, perhaps permanently.

She wouldn't, he supposed, attach any great importance to it – any more than she had done to that love-affair when she was only seventeen, of which she'd merely said: 'All girls have got to go through it some time or another.'

Yes, Ballance was right, some people are born unlucky, and she was one of them; bad luck was her portion, as his was, or appeared to be, a quiet life in easy circumstances. That explained why she was so morose. No, not morose, resigned.

Indeed, even this word was too precise; she was merely apathetic. For her, life was not so much a vale of tears as a waste of boredom, and though she did what had to be done, she never (so far as he could see) took the slightest interest in it.

Whereas he, Guérec, was never bored, and could enjoy life under all, even its most trivial, aspects. Every day was for him a round of small enjoyments. It was a pleasure to jump out of bed on a frosty morning, to crack the ice on his water-jug, as he had done on New Year's Day, and to peep out of the window to see what the weather was like.

It was a joy to come downstairs and be greeted by the savoury aroma of hot coffee, to stretch his hands to the fire, to see the red-and-white check table-cloth laid for breakfast, the shining plates and cups and saucers. Everything delighted him, according to its kind; his well-greased seaboots, the warmth of a jersey, the soft feel of a muffler. It was pleasant, too, exchanging a few friendly words with Louis, the ferryman, as he crossed the harbour.

And it was a joy to go on board one of his boats, to remind himself that there would be a succulent stew for lunch, to shake a friend's hand, to drop into a café and sniff the pipe-smoke in the air – even though he himself was not allowed to smoke.

How marvellous it would be if one day he saw Marie's face lit up at last with some such simple joy! One of her charms for him was the mystery he found in her. For it passed his understanding how anybody could get through life without those thousand-and-one small satisfactions which meant everything to him.

So he went on bringing the little boy chocolates or toys, and, but that he feared she would reject them, would have lavished gifts on Marie too.

Was he in love?

He was always asking himself that question, and at sea there

was ample time for self-communings, but the answer had always eluded him. As for living with her all his life – well, frankly, he couldn't say if the idea appealed to him or not. There was no denying that the thought of giving up his home, his habits, his sisters – a whole host of things that had made up his life so far – somewhat dismayed him ...

That small boy he had run over in the street was another who seemed to have been born under an unlucky star. What a curious concatenation of circumstances had been needed to bring about his death! First of all, Céline's decision to buy a car; next, Guérec's happening to stay late at Quimper; and then his driving homewards at precisely so many miles an hour. The position of the street lamp, too, had made a difference. All sorts of factors had contributed ...

It had been pure mischance – like the death of Marie's father. Ballanec had made it plain that if the prong of the pitchfork had entered a tiny fraction of an inch to the right, his life could have been saved.

Brooding on the vagaries of Chance, Guérec began to feel uneasy; nothing proved that the run of good luck he'd enjoyed so far would last his lifetime. Wasn't it up to him to propitiate destiny by sharing out some of his good luck with others?

And he hadn't even dared to mention to his sisters Marie's offer to do their washing!

'That's enough of it!' He rose to his feet. 'It's high time I was on deck.' But as he swung himself through the hatch, his mind was still a chaos of conflicting thoughts.

Once on deck, he called the crew together and studied the look of the water round the boat. That was enough to tell him if the catch would be a good one.

'Haul O!'

He worked with the others. Though he was the skipper, four of the seven men called him by his Christian name. Two of them had been working for the Guérecs since his father's time, when he was a youngster learning the ropes.

Sometimes one had a glimpse of the coast through a rift in the fog, and the sound of distant breakers could be heard.

Could he really bring himself to marry her? The possibility of marriage was something he had never seriously considered. For some reason he had always regarded his present mode of life as permanent; indeed, the idea that he might change it of his own free will had never crossed his mind. A baffling problem!

If he married Marie, he would become Edgar's father! The notion was so grotesque that he almost laughed aloud. Yet, after all, why not? Of course they wouldn't live in the Rue de l'Épargne. Marie would come to live at his house, with his sisters. She wouldn't have to take in people's washing but would look after the child, help Françoise with the housework, sew and knit with Céline. There was a big spare bedroom which they could occupy.

Out of the question – and he knew it. Why? For no reason that he could define precisely, but he felt in his bones it was impossible.

His sisters wouldn't hear of it.

Was that fair? Hadn't Marthe got married, and wasn't Émile treated as a member of the family?

Of course he, Guérec, would not have wanted Émile about the house all the time. Yes, that was the snag. The obvious solution was to go and live elsewhere; he could have another house built. But he found it hard to imagine himself waking up in a bedroom other than his present one with its outlook on the harbour mouth.

Whenever Philippe saw him he gave him a smile, a special kind of smile, and Guérec looked away.

He thought: 'He sees himself already as my brother-in-law!'

No, all that was beside the mark. His duty was perfectly plain. It was up to him to help Marie, to rescue her from poverty, to atone for the wrong he had unintentionally done

her. She had said that, if she knew who it was killed Joe, she could get a large sum of money out of him.

He owed her that money. And he was deceiving her every time he sat in her kitchen, professing to be her friend. He was a coward; worse, an impostor. He gave chocolates to Edgar, but that didn't change the fact he'd killed his brother ...

Luckily at this stage of his musings the trawl caught on the bottom. Luckily, for it meant that for the next two hours he had no time for thinking, and he had reached a stage where every thought was harrowing.

Suddenly the windlass came to a dead stop. Everyone looked over the side. The iron chain was vertical, and all knew what that meant.

Sometimes it was enough to reverse the engine, to pull from different angles, and the net came up easily. But this was one of the occasions when the heavy trawl-boards attached to the net get firmly wedged beneath a rock and one has to work for hours on end without knowing what is happening below: whether one is freeing them or jamming them still worse. Sometimes the task proves hopeless, and the net has to be left where it is, at the bottom of the sea – which means fifteen or twenty thousand francs' worth of gear irrevocably lost.

On such occasions there is much hard swearing on board, and, with a volley of expletives, Guérec took the helm himself and, quite unjustly, rounded on Ballanec for starting the engine too soon.

It was early morning and a white fog blanketed the sea. Another fishing-boat near by was blowing her siren constantly, and the *Françoise* had to follow suit.

Everyone had a suggestion to make. Soundings were taken. Old Durieu lugubriously announced that four or five nets had already been lost at this very spot.

'It's along of the blocks of concrete,' he explained, 'that they went and dumped here after the war.'

Guérec was aware of this, and also that, after the armistice,

torpedoes had been sunk here as well, and fishing was forbidden in these grounds. But as few fishing-boats came this way one could reckon on a good catch; the soles here were especially good, two-pounders and larger.

He wouldn't have confessed it to anyone, for fear of being laughed at, but this too was a pleasure in a way. He enjoyed this game of blind-man's-buff with an unseen enemy on the sea-floor, and the knowledge that if he won the game he'd recover his net more or less intact.

The sails had been furled; for the work in hand the auxiliary engine was enough. After a dozen unsuccessful attempts the chain slackened at last.

'Broken,' someone said.

But he was wrong. They had freed the trawl-board, and presently the bag-like net appeared above the surface, holed of course, but still by some fluke containing a good hundred pounds of fish.

It was their fourth day at sea. The day following was a Thursday, the best day of the week for marketing fish. Also they had a good six hours' work before them mending the damaged net.

'We'll start back now.'

The deck was sluiced down, and two men began repairing the net, while the others set the sails. The *Françoise* raced across the waves like a horse on his way back to the stable.

'What about selling the haul at Douarnenez?' old Durieu suggested. 'It's nearer and we can get there just in time for the auction.' The advice was sound and he was in his rights in giving it to Guérec, as the crew shared profits.

'No, we're going straight back to Concarneau.'

'Have it your own way, sonny!'

For Guérec had been seized by a desire to hurry back, and the mere prospect of meeting Marie again had set his senses tingling. He'd tell her straight that it was high time for her to start enjoying life, and he would see she did so. Only – how

absurd, how disgusting it was to be debarred from giving her money!

He was holding the tiller. It was an old habit of his, to steer the boat himself on the homeward run. That was another of his joys: his first glimpse of the grey walls of Concarneau, which on sunny days looked dazzling white and reminded him of villages on the Adriatic coast.

There was a strong current, the engine was running well, the waves were racing past the boat, which gently rocked this side and that like an enormous cradle. Now and then, either because Guérec's attention strayed or they met an exceptionally big sea, the boat would pitch steeply and a shower of spray fall on the fo'c'sle.

'How many boxes?'

'Five of soles. Twenty of wrasses and oddments. And there's a fine lot of turbot and brill.'

Meanwhile the men, wearing heavy oilcloth aprons, and gauntleted with strips of rubber from old tyres, were trimming the fish; for the better its appearance, the better the price it would fetch at the Fish Mart.

Each man had a little pile of damaged fish beside him which he would take home, along with the small octopuses and cuttlefish, for his family.

Twice Philippe came on deck and, grinning, pointed to Guérec's pocket, the one in which he kept his wallet. This was his way of reminding his skipper that he'd soon have the pleasure of seeing the original of the photograph.

'Clear out, Philippe! I don't want you here.'

But the lad was not abashed; even when Guérec flew into a temper it had no effect on him. He had shown his attitude once for all, by making no secret of the fact that he explored Guérec's pockets; probably he was so 'innocent' that this seemed to him a natural thing to do.

'Better be careful of your sisters!' said Ballanec, who came on deck now and then for a breath of fresh air. As usual, he

smelt of spirits, and his face was darkly flushed, so much so that Guérec wondered whether he too hadn't a high blood-pressure.

'What do you mean by that?'

'You know as well as I do. They can't like it. They've got so used to ...' He stopped abruptly, but Guérec guessed what he'd been about to say: 'to regarding you as their private property.'

That was so, but none the less he took the risk of having a four-pound turbot put aside. The crew might justly have protested, for it formed part of the common stock.

Concarneau was in sight. Before bringing the *Françoise* into the dock where the tunny-fleet was moored, they had to make the old harbour, in the centre of the town, as near as could be to the Mart. As the tide was low, they dropped anchor off the Old Town and lowered the boat.

Guérec was the first to go on shore, with a boat-load of fish. That was another of life's little pleasures, stepping ashore after days and nights afloat, and watching other fishermen strolling up to inspect the haul, holding up the soles to judge their quality.

'Where did you go?'

'Douarnenez way.'

'Four days out, weren't you?'

'Three and a half.'

Small handcarts were always lined up along the wharf to convey the fish to the market-hall. The local fishmongers, too, came down to have a look.

'Had a good catch?'

'Just wait till you've seen our turbot!'

He had his, wrapped in paper, under his arm. The haul sold for two thousand eight hundred francs, a satisfactory figure, and while three of the crew took the *Françoise* to her moorings, he hastened to the Rue de l'Épargne.

Smiling to himself, he rang the bell and at the same time

rattled the letter-box, as the small boy did on his return from school.

‘Hullo, Mariel!’

‘Is that for me?’ she asked when she saw him unpacking the turbot.

‘Of course it is. Why do you think I brought it?’

‘It’s much too big. We’ll never be able to eat all that.’

‘Oh yes, you will. A good tuck-in will help to build up Edgar’s strength. He needs it.’

He went to the kitchen and sat down, holding his seaboots to the fire.

‘I’ve thought a lot about you when we were at sea.’

‘Really? ... Won’t Philippe be coming back?’

‘Yes, any minute now. They’re just mooring the boat.’

‘Sailing again tomorrow?’

‘No, not for three days. Four in fact, as I mean to spend Sunday here.’

The *Françoise* must be in sight now from the house, whose windows overlooked the harbour entrance, and Guérec pictured his sisters awaiting his return, with sour looks on their faces.

‘I say, Marie, is it true you’ve never had any luck in life?’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Oh, I forget now ... But I mean to see you have a good time from now on.’

‘That’s very nice of you, but I don’t see how you’ll manage it. Anyhow, I’m so used to ...’

He had risen abruptly, and just as she was taking her iron off the hob he grasped her by the shoulders and kissed her with clumsy eagerness, half on her lips, half on her cheek.

CHAPTER VI

'Two thousand eight hundred francs,' he announced gaily as he entered the room.

But his cheerfulness met no response. Céline went on with her sewing and, when he came up and kissed her, did not return his kiss.

'Where's Françoise?'

'She'll be back presently.'

So ~~that~~ was how things stood! Only too well he knew the signs; a domestic storm was brewing, and a serious one this time, judging by the look on Céline's face, her tight-set lips.

'Have the soles been brought?' He had told one of his crew to deliver three soles at the house.

'Yes. They're in the kitchen, I believe.'

Françoise entered. She had no coat on; which meant that she had been round to visit the woman next door. Her greeting was as cold as Céline's. All she said to her brother was:

'What do you want to eat?'

'What is there?'

'There's a chop left. And I can try you some eggs.'

'Ah, you've had your lunch!'

They'd done it on purpose; of that he had no doubt. On previous occasions, when the approach of the boat was signalled, they had always waited lunch for him and had an ample meal in readiness. And no sooner did he enter than they plied him with questions.

But to-day Céline didn't even deign to look his way, and remained bent over her sewing, her angular profile outlined against the greyness of the window.

'I won't eat anything,' he said sulkily. 'I shall go straight to bed.'

And Françoise retorted calmly:

‘Please yourself.’

She made no effort to detain him, but there was something so unusual about it all that he couldn’t tear himself away. Never before had his sisters acted thus, and they had planned it all in advance – he could have sworn to it!

‘Is my room ready, anyhow?’

‘Of course.’

Small disappointments of this sort always hit Guérec hard. He had been looking forward to a copious and cheerful lunch, followed by the luxury of three or four hours’ rest in a real bed; and after that a warm bath before coming down again, for dinner.

Had his sisters found out already that he had been to Marie’s before coming home? Even if they had, was there anything so criminal about it? But, of course, someone might have told them about the big turbot he had given Marie; that might account for the way they were behaving.

As he undressed he felt more and more aggrieved at their unreasonableness. If they thought he was going to make the first advance, they were mistaken. He’d let them speak first – for it was another trick of theirs, this studied aloofness. They knew it would make him embarrassed, and set him wondering how much they knew, and they counted on his blurting out something, to have done with it.

Not he! He wasn’t to be drawn so easily! Pulling the sheet up to his chin, he closed his eyes, though he had little hope of sleeping; there was too much on his mind.

What had he done? What exactly had he said? Perhaps he would have done better to take thought before speaking as he had spoken.

When he kissed Marie she had not resisted, nor had she responded in any way. She had merely submitted to being kissed and, when he released her, all she had to say was:

‘Well? Have you done?’

She spoke without a trace of anger or, for that matter, any other emotion, and yet the banal words affected him deeply. All of a sudden he felt ashamed of himself, and had asked with timid eagerness:

‘Tell me, Marie, how do you feel about it?’

What had prompted him to say that? Anyhow, the question was vague enough; it was still possible for him to leave without creating further complications. She had not asked him to explain. But it was he who wouldn’t leave well alone!

‘Tell me, Marie, what’s your idea about me?’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘I mean, do you realize I’m ... I’m in earnest?’

‘When you kiss me?’

‘When I tell you you’re in my thoughts all the time; even your brother noticed it when we were on board ship together ... Do you love me, Marie – just a little?’

‘I’d no idea you were so sentimental.’

Sentimental! At that moment he could have shed tears at the least provocation! His eyes were burning, and he gazed at her beseechingly.

‘There’s nothing I’d hate more than for you to think I’m ... trifling with you. You see what I mean?’

‘Afraid I don’t.’

‘I mean that I respect you, Marie, and that when I tell you I love you, my ... my intentions are serious.’

‘You don’t say so!’

So far she had calmly gone on doing her housework. Now, however, she wiped her hands on a duster hung beside the range and planted herself in front of him.

‘Don’t you believe it?’ he asked.

‘You surely don’t want me to think ...?’

‘I do.’

What had come over him to talk like that? Even in retrospect the thought of it made him feel hot and cold all over. He had an impression that the world he knew was crumbling

under his feet. And what would come of it hardly bore thinking about. She had been the first to utter the word.

‘You mean you want to *marry* me?’

She was actually laughing – at him, he supposed. The first time he’d seen her laugh!

‘Yes, I do mean it. Listen, Marie. Ever since we met for the first time I’ve been watching you, and I really admire you ...’

‘There’s nothing to admire in me.’

‘You’re wrong. There is. Now will you let me kiss you again? With your consent this time.’

‘Oh, if you really want to ...’

And this time there was some improvement; her lips moved a little, she almost returned his kiss.

‘Well, are you satisfied now? You’d better go home at once, or your sisters will scold you for staying here so long. It was bad enough your bringing that big fish.’

‘Scold me! Surely I’m old enough –’

‘No, you aren’t – and never will be!’

‘Listen, Marie!’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you consent?’

‘To marry you? I may consent the day when one of your sisters comes to ask me for my hand.’ She laughed again; then added in a gentler tone: ‘Now do be sensible. Crying won’t mend matters. They’ll never agree to it, and I don’t blame them. Now, go. Edgar will be back any moment.’

Hardly had she spoken than they heard the familiar rattle of the letter-box.

He had gone to see her without any definite plan in mind, and never dreamt, when he crossed her threshold, that he was going to commit himself so deeply. For there was no getting away from it; he had proposed marriage to her. And as good as promised to tell his sisters about it.

Marie hadn’t said ‘No’, and he should have been feeling pleased. Perhaps she had been more affected than she cared to

show. He had always had the impression that her indifference was only on the surface; it was not that she had no feelings, but she was chary of displaying them.

How much did his sisters know? One day, inevitably, there would be a show-down – but when? Once, when he was a youngster, Céline had kept it up for three days, never addressing a word to him except when absolutely necessary, and had gradually worn down his resistance, until at last he'd burst into tears and confessed what she'd wanted to know. His secret on that occasion hadn't concerned a woman, but a bicycle he had bought without telling his sisters and was keeping at a friend's house.

He felt limp and tired, and his head was aching slightly. How childish of him to have refused to eat – as though that were a way of spiting his sisters!

At last he fell asleep. Late in the afternoon, after a leisurely wash and shave, he came downstairs again, deliberately humming a cheerful tune. The lamps were lit in the big room. To his surprise, Marthe was there as well as Céline and Françoise. She proffered her forehead for him to kiss, but said not a word.

'Is Émile coming to dinner?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'It's not the usual day, is it?'

No one deigned to answer. He drew a chair up near the stove and started reading the paper. For a full hour they left him to his paper, without saying a word to him. Now and again he sighed and changed the position of his chair.

'I think I'll alter the collar of my old black dress and put a round one instead,' he heard Françoise say.

But her voice wasn't natural; his sisters were as ill at ease as he was. He felt sure now there had been a long confabulation about him while he was upstairs; perhaps before that, when he was at sea.

Émile turned up at half-past six and shook his brother-in-law's hand with almost his normal cordiality, but soon he too

succumbed to the general constraint. Obviously he was in the conspiracy – whatever it might be. Sometimes after starting to make some innocent remark to Guérec he would catch Céline's eye, and dry up abruptly.

The meal seemed never-ending, and several times Guérec was on the point of blurting out:

'Look here! What's the good of waiting? Say what you have to say and get it over.'

But he held his peace; he realized that to make the first move might put him at a disadvantage. Presumably the scene was timed for after dinner and, judging by the presence of the Gloaguens, would take the form of a family conference.

Needless to say, there was no question of a game of *belote*. On the contrary, no sooner was dinner over than Marthe said to her husband:

'Shall we go now?'

Then why ever had they come? Guérec could make nothing of these tactics. Émile promptly rose and both of them took their leave, kissing Céline a little more effusively than usual. Françoise started clearing away at once, and no sooner had she finished than she yawned and said: 'I think I'll go to bed. Good night, Céline. Good night, Jules,' and vanished up the staircase.

'In that case' – Guérec rose from his chair – 'I'll turn in too.' For some reason, he supposed, the scene had been adjourned.

'Stay,' Céline said.

'Have you something to say to me?'

'You'd guessed that, hadn't you?'

'Well, no. I can't say I had.'

The shutters were bolted, half the lamps in the big room switched off. They could hear Françoise's slippèred footsteps in the room above. Fretfully he murmured:

'All right. Go ahead!'

You may as well sit down.'

'Oh, it's going to be a long business, is it?'

He was playing for time. Now that the moment had come, he felt his courage ebbing, and he'd have given much to postpone things to the next day.

Suddenly, without looking up from her needlework, Céline remarked:

'I've learnt to drive. A garage-hand from the town has been giving me lessons.'

An ominous start! What possessed her to talk about the car, what could she be leading up to?

'As you never take it out now, I shall drive it myself. By the way, you've never been to see Marie Papin with the car, have you?'

'Why do you ask that?'

'Oh, just an idea ... There's no need for you to blush.'

'That's a mean trick!'

'Why?'

'You know quite well you've only to use the word to set me off blushing.'

'Anyway, that's a detail ... We have important things to talk about, you and I, Jules. Do you remember what you used to do when you were little? If you'd done something wrong you always owned up to it before going to bed. Because you might die during the night, and you were afraid of dying with something on your conscience.'

'What are you getting at?'

'How long have you been going to sleep with something on your conscience?'

'Really, I don't follow ...'

'You're not being frank, Jules. That used to be one of the nicest things about you, your openness, but I'm sorry to see you've been changing lately. When you came home to-day and called out the price your haul had fetched, you didn't even dare to look me in the face.'

'That's nonsense!'

'Will you swear it – on our dead mother's memory?'

'Oh, leave me in peace!'

'Not yet. I'm waiting for you to confess ... the thing you've done. I've not said anything to Marthe or Françoise yet. It may surprise you, but I've kept to myself what I've discovered.'

'And what have you discovered?'

'I'm waiting for you to tell it of your own accord.'

'And suppose I've nothing to tell ...?'

'In that case we'll take the car out to-morrow and drive up and down the road in front of Marie Papin's cottage. Will you do that?'

'It sounds pretty silly – but I'll do it if you want me to.'

He was lying. He knew he couldn't drive the car down that street, and he felt a cold sweat breaking out on him at the thought of what his sister would say next.

'Suppose the police had come, Jules? Think of the position we should have been in – all of us!'

'But –'

'Now look in the sideboard drawer.'

It was a drawer that locked, and was used by the family for keeping valuables and small sums of money. Opening it, Jules saw in an empty sweet-tin some thousand-franc notes.

'Count them.'

There were eight. Never would his sister have dreamt of keeping so large a sum in the house for a whole night.

'To-morrow morning I shall take that money to her ...'

'To bribe her into giving me up?' he said with a forced laugh.

'It wouldn't need so much money to do that, and you know it as well as I do. I rather think she'd give you up for – nothing!'

'In that case, I really can't see what you're driving at.'

'I shall tell her something she doesn't know ... as yet.'

'Céline!'

He was appalled. This was positively devilish! How on earth had she found it out? No one knew; he hadn't breathed a word to anyone on earth. For now there was no mistaking the drift of her remarks. It was to *that* she was referring.

'Don't keep walking up and down the room like that,' she said. 'It makes me quite giddy. Do sit down and steady your nerves ... How exactly did it happen?'

'How did *what* happen? ... How do you know?'

She sighed and answered him with a phrase he had often heard on her lips.

'I know you inside out, Jules. I've been watching you for the last few weeks. Before that you seemed to enjoy driving the car; you took it out every day. When you told me about your wallet and the woman you'd been with at Quimper, you came out with it too pat; I knew you were trying to hide something – something more serious. Well, I put two and two together. I compared the dates, and times. And I shudder to think how easily someone else might have had the same idea ...'

'So you really think it was I who ...!'

'I've been *sure* about it, for the last fortnight.'

'Why didn't you say anything to me before?'

'What use would that have been? If you hadn't become infatuated with this wretched woman ... Now, do you understand?'

He lowered his eyes, unable to find an answer. After a long silence she asked:

'What do you propose to do?'

'What do you mean by that?'

'We don't want to have our name dragged in the mud. I shall go and see that woman to-morrow, and tell her the truth. And I shall give her the money on her undertaking not to say a word to anyone ... I've no wish to have my brother go to jail – for three or four years, quite likely. And that's what you've exposed us to with your absurd goings-on!'

'You mean ... that it's all my fault?'

'Yes, all your fault. If you'd come and told me about it at once ... Anyhow, I hope that woman will listen to reason. It's a big sacrifice we're making.'

Suddenly he stopped pacing up and down the room and rounded on his sister.

'I forbid you!'

'What do you forbid me?'

Françoise, in bed upstairs, could hear them talking. Probably she thought the subject was his 'goings-on' with Marie.

'I forbid you to tell her it was I who ...'

'So you'd rather go on deceiving her? For every time you go to see her, that's what it comes to. You are trading on her ignorance - you, the man who -'

'Keep quiet!'

'The man who killed her son. And you pretend to be her friend, you have the effrontery to bring sweets and toys for the other child ...'

'I swear to you, Céline ...' His mind was in such a chaos that he hardly knew if he or she were in the right. 'I swear to you, Céline, that there's no pretence about it. Marie's a splendid woman, and I've become very fond of her. I've never had a home ...'

'That's a nice thing to say - to me!'

'I mean a home of my own, like other men have. Don't forget I'm forty - high time for a man to have a wife and children.'

'I presume you're not counting on Marie Papin ...'

'Why not?'

'Don't you realize? Really, sometimes I can't help wondering if you're quite right in your head. You actually think you can marry that woman after killing her son? What a monstrous idea! You disgust me!'

'Céline!'

'Go to bed. We've talked quite enough. I shall go and see

Marie Papin tomorrow and hand her the money. It's only fair that she should have about what she'd have got if the case had come to court. After that you can please yourself – ask her to marry you, if you feel like it.'

'I've done that already.'

'What? You've proposed marriage to her?'

'Yes – this morning, if you must know. Don't you realize I love her? And I've a perfect right to love her, whatever you may say.'

'And you've a duty too: to tell her the truth. As you haven't the pluck to do that, I shall have to do it for you.'

'I forbid you!'

But she merely shot him an ironic glance across her needle-work.

'Listen, Céline.'

'I'm listening.'

'If you do what you've just said, I warn you I shan't stay here a day longer. I'll leave this house – for ever. What's more, I'll have it sold up and take my share ...'

The irony died out of Céline's eyes and a new look came into them.

'You dare to speak like that! You're not afraid that our mother, up in heaven, may hear your words?'

'And what about you?'

'Why should I be afraid? I'm only doing my duty. I cannot let you marry this woman whom you're deceiving, and who will loathe you when she knows the truth.'

'That's a lie.'

'You think so? Then put it to the test. Go to her and say, "I killed your son with my car, but I've given sweets and toys to your other child, I've paid your brother fifteen francs a day, and now my one wish is to marry you." Can't you imagine what she'd answer?'

Abruptly he sank into a chair beside the stove, burying his

face in his hands, his body racked by sobs. He had no fight left, and all he felt was an enormous inanition, a sense of futility such as he had never known before. There was a long silence during which Céline kept her eyes fixed on him. At last she spoke:

‘Jules!’

No answer.

‘Will you listen to me?’ His shoulders heaved, but he still said nothing, and after a moment she went on. ‘Aren’t you happy with us, Jules? Haven’t we always looked after you, far better than any wife would do? Do you really think you’d be happy elsewhere, away from us?’

She knew her words were striking home, and could guess the pictures they evoked. For that was the truth; he *had* been happy with his sisters. They had done everything within their power to make life easy for him, and all they asked in return was obedience in little things – such as not drinking spirits, not smoking; and he could but own that he had suffered little by these trivial privations. Yes, when all was said and done, their yoke had been a light one.

‘You know quite well, Jules, when poor mother left us, we did our best to take her place ... And, above all, don’t get it into your head that we want to keep you from marrying. Only, when you marry, for heaven’s sake choose a girl who’s worth while, a nice, ordinary girl who ...’

‘And I?’ he asked with comical confusion. ‘Would you call me an ordinary young man?’

‘Well, you’re only forty. You’re well off. You’ll inherit from both of us ...’

‘Nonsense! You’ll outlive me, both of you.’

‘How can you tell? Now do try to be sensible, Jules.’

How could he be sensible? Tears were streaming down his cheeks as he rose to his feet again. No, he couldn’t, couldn’t let Marie down like that! He almost shouted at his sister:

'But I love her!'

'No, you don't love her. You think so because you're sorry for her. And so am I. She's a poor woman who's had no luck in life. I've been making enquiries ...'

'You would!'

'And I have nothing whatever against her - except that she wouldn't make a suitable wife for you. Can you really see her living here, with us, for instance?'

'We'd go and live somewhere else.'

'Live somewhere else? My poor dear Jules, don't you realize how miserable you'd be? You're a creature of habits, a mass of fads and fancies. If she forgot to warm your slippers one winter evening, you'd be thoroughly upset. Why, to-day you looked like crying because we hadn't waited lunch for you and there was only a cold chop. I did it on purpose, just to see ...'

'That's enough. I'm going up to bed.'

'Then I give her the eight thousand francs tomorrow morning?'

'Listen, Céline! As I said just now, if you do that, or if you breathe a word to her about the ... the accident, I swear I'll leave the house at once.'

'And you'll be back before the week is out!'

'We'll see!'

'Yes, we'll see. Good night, Jules.'

'Good night.'

'You won't kiss me?'

'No.'

'And suppose I died in the night? How would you feel about it in the morning, when you remembered you'd refused to kiss me?'

A form of sentimental blackmail that she'd started practising on him when he was only five. And, as usual, it succeeded. Bending forward, he brushed her forehead with his lips.

'Good night, Céline.'

'You'll see things differently in the morning,' she assured him.

*

But no sooner had he opened his eyes than all his anxieties settled on him again, like a dark cloud. He had waked much later than usual; he could tell it by the light. That was not surprising, as he had failed to get to sleep till the small hours.

He jumped out of bed and ran to the window. The public clock in the Old Town told him it was nine. The frost had changed again to a misty drizzle. One fishing-boat, a drifter, was going out to sea, rows of empty baskets aligned along her deck.

How should he dress to-day? Should he go and work on one of the boats? Or would he have calls to pay in the town?

He listened attentively to the noises of the house, but the only sound that came to him was the purr of a sewing-machine. Evidently Françoise had made an early start.

He dressed rapidly. His eyes were red and in the tarnished looking-glass his face looked even crookeder than usual. The stairs gave their accustomed creak as he went down, and the familiar smell of coffee greeted him as he stepped into the big room. His place was laid at the breakfast-table on the red-and-white check cloth.

Françoise was sitting by the window, at her sewing-machine. The charwoman, who came twice a week, was washing the tiled floor.

'Where's Céline?' he asked at once.

'She's out ... You've forgotten to say "Good morning" to me.'

'Sorry. Good morning, Françoise. Where's she gone?'

'To the market, I suppose. It's Friday to-day.'

'She didn't leave a message for me?'

'No, she seemed in a hurry.'

'How was she dressed?'

'She had her best dress.'

What should he do? What, for that matter, *could* he do? Perhaps because it was being given its weekly clean-up, the big room looked bleak, inhospitable as a railway waiting-room. A picture rose before him of Marie's kitchen – where, perhaps, Céline was at this very moment.

Should he go and join her? What would be the use? He couldn't deny the truth of what she was saying.

After the bad night his head felt heavy as lead, and he had twinges in the region of his heart which convinced him he was really ill. He made a wry face, to get sympathy from Françoise.

'Still those pains?'

'Yes, now and again.'

'That's because you didn't stick to your diet when you were at sea.'

Typical, that remark! All three of them – Marthe, perhaps, a shade less than her sisters – always reduced things to their most prosaic level. Naturally, if he was feeling out of sorts, that was because he'd eaten something that had disagreed with him. That was all the sympathy he got. Damn them all!

'Where are you off to?' Françoise asked, when she saw him put on his clogs and go to the street door.

'I'm going out. Can't say where.'

'Don't forget your muffler.'

All right, he'd take it, just to humour her. That would be a catastrophe, if he caught cold! He tried to smile, but couldn't. Nor did he feel like weeping. But, on the slightest provocation, he'd have come to blows with anyone. All sorts of memories were floating in his mind; of the wallet he'd thrown down the closet, of the car-licence which he hadn't yet been able to replace, of the big fish he'd given Marie. Suppose, when Céline was there, she set eyes on it? Almost certainly it hadn't been eaten yet. He never brought home turbot of that size, and rarely even soles. His sisters professed to find coarse fish just as good, and insisted on his selling the better kinds.

Rain was drenching his cap and shoulders. For some time he watched Louis ferrying people to and fro, but did not see Céline amongst them.

Anyhow, he had given his promise to Marie – nothing could change that. And he was resolved to keep his word to her. But he had also sworn to his sister that, if she betrayed his secret, he wouldn't stay a day longer in the house.

'In that case I can sleep on board the *Françoise*,' he told himself.

As a temporary expedient, of course. For, if he kept to what he'd said, the three boats would have to be sold, and the house as well, and the proceeds shared out between his parents' heirs.

He was within his rights. Indeed the question had cropped up already, when Marthe got married. She, however, had been content with an advance of five thousand francs on account of her share, to pay for furnishing her flat.

The two boats could be seen from where he stood, and a ribbon of smoke from one of the small chimneys told him that Philippe was on board. It almost brought tears to his eyes when he recalled how the young half-wit used to point to his wallet, and, beaming with delight, show that he knew Guérec's secret.

Edgar must be at school. He'd become much less hostile during Guérec's recent visits. So far he hadn't actually smiled, but he no longer seemed to resent Guérec's presence in the house.

Had she really gone there?

He paced up and down the water-front under the drizzle, and watched the ferry make a dozen or so trips across the harbour, before he caught sight of Céline hurrying down to the landing-place on the far side.

She saw her brother at once and kept her eyes fixed on his face, as if trying to read his thoughts. And he, too, watched her, with even more anxiety, approaching in the ferry.

She gave the usual two sous to Louis, who helped her ashore with her things.

‘Won’t you give me a hand, Jules?’

With an ill grace he went down the steps and took from her the big blue shopping-net, which he himself had made for her in his off-time on board ship. It now contained some cauliflowers and packages of various sizes, her morning’s marketing.

‘Where have you been?’

‘Can’t you see? Shopping.’

‘And – where else?’

Sheltering her white Breton bonnet with her umbrella, she murmured vaguely:

‘We’ll talk about that presently.’

CHAPTER VII

THERE were only a few yards to go. As Guérec stood aside in the doorway to let his sister enter first he caught sight of Cauchois in the shadowy interior of the shop. And it was probably that moment which decided everything.

Guérec had never cared for Cauchois, a skipper-owner like himself, whose boat was far and away the oldest and dirtiest of all the fishing-fleet. Also he was a drunkard, and had a disgusting habit of clawing your jersey with his grimy nails and spluttering in your face when he talked to you. Almost more irritating were his pretensions to know more about navigation than any other skipper on the coast – just because he had served a few years in a four-master on the Chile run.

Had he not been carrying Céline’s parcels, Guérec would certainly have beaten a hasty retreat. He was in no mood for talking, especially to Cauchois, who got on his nerves at the best of times.

'Aha! There he is, the rascal!' bawled Cauchois, who was leaning against the counter, a glass in his hand. 'I knew he'd be back soon. Listen, Jules, my lad! I've just been telling your sister ...'

Françoise had seen no way of refusing to serve him a drink. Céline went straight through to the dining-room, where she took off her coat. It had just gone twelve and the table was laid for lunch.

'You know the sort of man I am, sonny. Straight as a die. That's so, ain't it? There's no hanky-panky about old Cauchois. You know that, don't you?'

'Yes, yes,' Guérec muttered absent-mindedly, his eyes fixed on Céline. He was trying to guess what she had done, and even made a vague gesture to convey the question he dared not ask in public.

She responded with a slow, calm nod. But had she really understood? And if she had, mightn't she have nodded only to aggravate him? She was quite capable of that! Cauchois ambled up to him.

'Now tell me, Jules. How much exactly do I owe you now?'

'Look here! Couldn't you come back later? We're just going to have lunch.'

'No, my boy, I couldn't. I said to my missus, "I'm going to fix it up with him right away," and I mean to do so.'

They looked up the ledger. Cauchois owed close on six thousand francs, for he bought his tackle and petrol on credit.

'That's about what I expected. Now listen! Suppose, instead of paying cash, I make over to you a share in my boat?'

'What's she worth, your boat?'

'You know as well as me; she's one of the finest ketches in Concarneau harbour.'

'One of the rottenest, you mean.'

They had taken their seats for lunch, and Guérec, who was watching his sister, saw her smiling to herself, as if she were

pleased about something. It looked as if she had managed to pass the word to Françoise, for she too looked pleased.

Meanwhile Cauchois kept babbling away in Guérec's ear.

'A tenth share will bring you in three thousand francs each season.'

How silly not to have thought of it before! Guérec rose from his seat, went to the sideboard, and opened the tin in which the money had been.

The eight thousand francs were gone!

'Céline!' He remained standing beside the open drawer. He did not care whether Cauchois heard or not; on the contrary, it might be a good thing to have a witness of the scene that was impending.

'Yes, Jules? ... Do sit down.'

'Did you really go there?'

'Of course I did.'

'And you told her ... ?'

'Why, yes, I told her ... Why are you looking at me like that?'

Even now he could hardly believe it. She must be trying to frighten him – that would be quite like her! Perhaps all she'd really done was to deposit the money in the bank before going about her marketing.

'I want a straight answer, damn it! It's much more serious than you seem to think.'

Cauchois, who 'was sitting astride a chair, stared at him aghast.

'Steady on, man! What on earth's come over you?'

'Mind your own business! I'm talking to my sister, not to you. Now then, Céline, give me some proof you went there.'

She rose from the table, her mouth full, fetched her bag, which was lying on a table, fished out a slip of paper and held it out to her brother.

Guérec had no wish to eat. He was torn by conflicting impulses. Common sense told him to keep his mouth shut for the

present, to go out for a stroll, and come back only in an hour or so, by which time Cauchois would have left, and he himself calmed down, in better form for having it out with his sisters.

It was not so much anger that he felt as an immeasurable disgust, and something like hatred of Céline. For a moment he was inclined to wave the slip of paper away. There was no hurry ... Suddenly he snatched it from her hand and walked to the window to read it.

'Received from Mlle Celine Guérec Fcs. 8000, eight thousand francs, in consideration of which sum I waive all claims I may have against any member of the family on any ground whatever.'

Françoise, who had been watching him, suddenly screamed: 'Jules!'

For she had seen him lowering his head and hunching his shoulders like an angry bull – but it was, above all, the frenzy in his eyes that terrified her.

He strode towards Céline and held out the slip of paper, saying, 'Here you are!'

But instead of letting go when her fingers closed on it, he suddenly struck her full in the face.

'You bitch!' he snarled. 'So you did it after all!'

But for the presence of Cauchois things might have gone no farther. Françoise shrieked and jumped up from her chair. Céline raised an arm to protect her face, but Guérec struck her again with the flat of his hand.

'You bitch of hell! And what did she say? Tell me that! Does she hate me now? Has your dirty plan succeeded?'

Cauchois, who had crept up behind him, made a fumbling effort to secure his arms, but Guérec swung round and hurled the drunkard away, sending him sprawling on the floor.

'Oh, Jules!' Françoise whimpered. 'Do try to control yourself!'

Why should he control himself? It was the first time in his life that he had given way to anger, anyhow to this extent,

and it came as a relief. When he saw Céline's face, deathly pale, and her gesture of affright, he felt a thrill of savage exultation and he raised his arm again.

'Ah, so you thought you could get away with it like that, did you?'

Cauchois, who had picked himself up, returned to the attack.

'Look here, Jules! You mustn't hit a woman. I forbid you ...'

'The hell you do!'

He struck him with his fist on the chin. Reeling back, Cauchois crashed against the window, which flew into fragments.

'Please, Jules! For heaven's sake ... Do try to calm yourself.'

But that was just what he didn't mean to do - to calm himself. Deliberately he thought of Marie, the little kitchen, the photograph in his pocket-book.

Françoise was clinging to his right arm. He shook himself free and advanced again on Céline, who rushed out into the big room and locked the door behind her.

'Open that door, damn you!'

Three times he said it, gritting his teeth. Then he picked up one of the dining-room chairs and hurled it at the door. As he flung the chair he had a glimpse of people gathering in the street outside and staring through the broken window.

The chair proved ineffective; all he had done was to break its back and hurt his hand. He lunged against the door with all his weight.

A panel cracked. He had no idea what he meant to do; his mind was in a turmoil, but all the time an inner voice was urging, 'Steady on! Don't go too far!'

He had momentarily lost sight of the others. There were voices behind him and he saw someone climbing in through the window. Cauchois was still in the room.

'So you won't open the door? You're afraid of me, are you?'

If only he could get at her he'd beat her till she screamed for mercy. He'd make her go down on her knees and beg his pardon; then drag her to Marie's and make her beg Marie's pardon too.

At last the door gave way. The big room was empty. His sister had escaped. The door of the cupboard containing wines and spirits stood open; in a rush of baffled rage he picked up a chair and flung it at the bottles.

Ten or a dozen people had gathered in the doorway; there were some children too, whom their parents were trying to hustle back into the street. Let them all come! What did he care? The unbelievable had happened – for he'd never really thought Céline would carry out her threat. Anyhow, not in the way she'd gone about it – so coolly, almost casually, going shopping afterwards and coming home as if nothing had happened, or, rather, pleased with herself as if she'd done a good stroke of business, with that damned receipt in her pocket ...

'Where are you?'

As he was making another move Cauchois leapt on him from behind, and the two men crashed on to the floor. Cauchois, too, was seeing red by now and, realizing he was the weaker of the two, he dug his teeth into Guérec's right hand. Guérec yelled and started belabouring the other with his free hand.

What had become of Françoise? Where was Céline? They seemed to have vanished into thin air. As he rolled on the floor all he could see was legs and clogs level with his eyes. Then people started tugging at his shoulders. They had to hammer Cauchois on the head before he would unclench his teeth.

His clothes torn and crumpled, Guérec rose to his feet and gazed sullenly around the room, disgusted with himself, with

life, with everything. The cupboard was full of broken glass, and liquids of various colours were trickling down from shelf to shelf. The street door stood wide open and the floor beside it was soiled with the marks of muddy boots and clogs. A group of women in the street were watching through the doorway. Cauchois had promptly gone to the bar and was having a drink to set him up, and giving his version of what had happened.

‘It came over him all of a sudden like. No one’d done anything to him.’

‘Françoise!’ Guérec called.

But she must have followed Céline upstairs. Probably both of them were on the landing, listening.

Guérec’s hand was bleeding. He was just going to close the street door when he saw two gendarmes alighting from their bicycles.

‘Been having trouble here?’ They evidently thought there had been a drunken brawl in the café and that it was Guérec who had sent for them.

‘Well, yes. I’ve struck some blows.’

‘Whom did you strike?’

Cauchois cut in. ‘Me!’

Shrugging his shoulders, Guérec added:

‘My sister, too.’

‘Where is she?’

‘Things had come to such a pass I had to do something.’

‘Who caused all that breakage?’

‘I did.’

The gendarmes were at a loss what to do. So was he. Fortunately just then Céline came down the stairs, her head-dress spick and span as usual, and looking as calm as if nothing had happened.

‘Clear out, all of you,’ she said to the people who had crowded into the room, and, turning to the gendarmes, ‘Who sent for you?’

'When we were going by the church we were told there was a row on here.'

'There was nothing at all. You'll have a little drink, won't you? And what about you, Cauchois? Feeling better, I hope.'

Cauchois grunted something, drank off the glass of brandy she handed him, and shot a furtive glance at Guérec who, turning his back on them, walked out of the room.

He went up to his bedroom, opened his wardrobe and slammed on to the bed the light suitcase he had bought for his last trip to Paris. He was muttering to himself:

'No, I won't stand it any longer ... It's got to end ... There's nothing else for it. And it's all her fault, blast her!'

He bundled some clothes into the suitcase, put on his best shoes, sponged his eyes and forehead and tied a handkerchief round his wounded finger.

He had opened the window. He was waiting for the gendarmes to leave, before going down, but they lingered on, drinking and talking to Cauchois, who couldn't be persuaded to go.

Then, hearing footsteps in the passage, Guérec flung the door open and found himself face to face with Françoise. Her eyes fell on the suitcase.

'What are you up to?'

'I'm going away.'

'Where?'

'I don't know. But I know one thing - I'll never set foot in this house again.'

'Jules, please ...'

'Please - what?'

'Listen. Céline thought she was acting for the best. If you'd given her a chance she'd have explained.'

He caught sight of himself in the glass, and as usual his face looked crooked. The gendarmes seemed to be making a move at last; he heard them laughing and talking in the doorway. He could hear others laughing too, and, peeping out, saw groups

of people in the street, waiting to see what would happen next.

Guérec put on his cap and, brushing Françoise aside, went downstairs. Céline was by herself in the big room, for Cauchois had gone off with the gendarmes, in whose company he proposed to tour the pubs, giving lurid details of the rough house at the Guérecs'.

When Guérec's eyes met his sister's his resolution faltered for a moment. There was no bravado in her gaze; only a look of grave, controlled distress. A red blotch showed on her left cheek.

Remarking, 'You haven't any money,' she went towards the dining-room. 'Wait!'

She came back with two thousand francs, taken from some reserve of which she'd never breathed a word.

'Here you are. When you want more I'll send it.'

Françoise had followed him downstairs. A small boy outside was flattening his nose against the window, watching.

'Oh, Jules ...!' Françoise sobbed.

When all was said and done, why go? Was there any sense in what he was doing? But it was too late to draw back, especially as the people in the street had seen him with the suitcase.

'Good-bye.'

His sisters all but leant forward to be kissed. Feeling utterly despondent, he opened the door, and the bell tinkled.

As he stepped outside someone called his name. It was one of his crew; the man had evidently heard what was happening at the Guérecs'.

'Shall we be sailing Monday, all the same?'

'I'll let you know.'

'Right you are, skipper. I only asked because ...'

He walked down to the ferry, threading his way between the little knots of people, and when he stepped into the boat had still no clear notion what he was going to do. Conscious

that everyone was watching him, he tried to assume a jaunty air. Louis started to ask him something, but thought better of it.

'Good-bye, Louis,' he said. 'I wonder when we'll meet again.'

For a moment he thought of going to see Marie. But what could he say to her? Quite likely she'd refuse to let him in. He had killed her son. After that he had shamefully deceived her. For all he knew she might believe that he'd been making love to her simply to get out of paying damages!

He saw some friends in the distance, and waved to them. One of them shouted:

'Going for a trip to Paris?'

Still undecided, he walked to the station. There was a train about to leave for Rennes, and he got into it.

At Rennes he went straight to the nearest hotel, the Station Hotel, and shut himself up in his room.

'My dear Marthe ...'

It was eight in the evening when he settled down to write. Before completing the letter he made half a dozen false starts, which he consigned to the waste-paper basket.

'My dear Marthe, - I expect you have heard by now all that has happened. This morning Céline did something so vile that I prefer not to write about it, and what its consequences will be I cannot say. All I can say is that I am resolved never to return to a house in which I have been abominably treated and had my whole life wrecked.'

'I write to you to give you my address, as you may want to get in touch with me. But I warn you that on no account will I meet Céline and that nothing you or others may say will induce me to do so.'

'Please remember me affectionately to your husband.'

'Your affectionate brother'

'Jules'

After roaming the streets for an hour, he drifted into a picture-house, for want of anything to do. He didn't feel like

sleeping. Now and then he thought of Céline, and had an emotion almost akin to remorse.

He had struck hard. It was the first time in his life that he had hit her. When he left home the marks of his blows were still apparent on her cheek; yet she had come forward of her own accord and given him money. Without that money he wouldn't have been able to leave Concarneau, and would have been obliged to return to the house.

He was not in the least homesick, only bored and dejected; when the cinema closed he went to a café and asked for writing materials.

'My dear Marie, - Now you know all, you can picture how miserable I am feeling. I had hoped to atone for my involuntary crime by making you and little Edgar as happy as I could, and I intended to devote the rest of my life to the two of you ...'

Tears had come to his eyes. Then suddenly he pictured Marie moving about her kitchen, glancing through his letter, tossing it carelessly on to the table, amongst piles of linen waiting to be ironed, or the remnants of a meal.

What could his feelings matter to her? She had accepted Céline's proposal. She had taken the eight thousand francs and given a formal receipt!

And, suppose they had got married, he and Marie, what sort of life would they have had together? Could they have lived in the same house with his sisters? And would Marie have consented to have another child? In which case, how would the two children have got on together; his and some other man's?

He tore up the letter, took another sheet, wrote only two words: *'Forgive me.'*

After posting it he trudged back to the hotel and went to bed in a strange room, with an unfamiliar smell.

Next morning he heard trams clanging in the street and all sorts of noises different from those of Concarneau. A

chambermaid in black and white brought him his early coffee, and he asked if there were any letters for him. But it was too soon for any to have come.

A new thought waylaid him. He had warned his crew for Sunday, or Monday at the latest. Really he should do something to let them know the cruise was 'off'. For nothing would induce him to return to Concarneau, come what might ... But, after all, his sisters had only to engage another skipper.

He went out for a stroll. But every hour or so he called back at the hotel to enquire if any letter had come for him. Finally, at five in the afternoon, the hotel porter informed him:

'There's a lady and gentleman waiting for you in the writing-room.'

It was his rat-faced brother-in-law and Marthe, and never had the former looked so solemn; what was more, he had dressed with even more than his usual spruceness. With the air of an ambassador on a mission of national importance he advanced towards Guérec and shook his hand with duly tempered warmth.

Marthe, however, burst into tears the moment she saw her brother, and had to extract her handkerchief from her bag. As there was an old lady writing letters at a table near by, Guérec suggested adjourning to his bedroom.

He had not chosen it, and the manageress had assigned to him a fair-sized room with mahogany furniture, a big wardrobe fronted with a mirror, two armchairs beside the fireplace. Emile's shrewd eyes took it all in at a glance; then, placing his hat on the bed, he began portentously:

'The position, my dear Jules, is a rather delicate one ...'

'What does Céline say?'

'What should she say?'

'Does she know I'm here?'

'Yes,' Marthe put in. 'And I told her I was coming.'

'Has she given you any message for me?'

'She gave me a letter.'

'Let's see it.'

He ripped the envelope open and reddened when his eyes fell on the first line:

'My dear Jules ...'

As if nothing had passed between them! As if he hadn't struck her, hadn't involved her in a public scandal!

'I had no opportunity yesterday of giving you details of my interview with a certain person. When I told her it was your car that was responsible she only said:

"I should have guessed it."

'But she showed no anger. Nor did she show any grief at being reminded of her child's death. Can you understand?

'I added that, under these circumstances, it was out of the question your continuing to see each other.

"But," I said, "it is only fair that we should give you a sum equivalent to what a court would have awarded you."

'I then laid the eight thousand francs on the table, on which she was ironing, and all she had to say was:

"After all, I prefer it that way."

'I write this not to distress you, but because I feel you should know it. As regards other matters Marthe and Émile will have a talk with you.

'Your sister

'Céline'

Guérec turned to Marthe.

'Did she let you read this letter?'

'No.'

That was decent of her, he thought, and went and sat down in front of the fireplace.

Émile, who had evidently a set speech ready in advance, took this opportunity of delivering it.

'Obviously the time is not yet ripe for any final decision. We had a long talk yesterday evening with Céline and

Françoise. Needless to say, the whole town knows what has happened and, let me tell you, my prestige as an official has suffered by this wretched incident. I'm not blaming you, my dear Jules; I'm merely pointing out a regrettable fact.'

The atmosphere in the bedroom was oppressive, and there was a ceaseless din outside; of clanging trams, cars hooting, locomotives whistling on the near-by sidings.

'The first point to be cleared up is this: Do you or don't you propose to come back to Concarneau and resume life with your family?'

'Oh, Émile!' Marthe seemed quite shocked at the mere idea that such a question could be mooted.

'Still, we must face the facts,' Emile continued. 'Don't forget that Céline has her pride. For several generations the Guérecs have been one of the most highly esteemed families in their part of Concarneau, and there can be no question that what has happened reflects on their good name.'

Guérec hardly listened; the remark Marie had made to Céline kept running in his head. 'After all, I prefer it that way.'

A typically vague remark. Did it mean that she preferred to have the eight thousand francs, cash down, without having to go to court? Or that she preferred not to marry him? Or - what could she have meant exactly?

And Céline - why had she acted in that heartless manner? Of course she had no inkling of the feverish weeks he had lived through, when he was gradually coming to realize he had fallen in love with Marie and a change was impending in his life. Marie, too, would have changed; of that he was convinced. He'd have taught her to forget her grievances, the bad luck that had dogged her all her life. He'd have taught her to smile ...

A picture kept hovering before him - of himself seated in the kitchen, an elbow on the table, watching Marie at her work, trying to interest her in what he said, or to make friends with that difficult youngster, Edgar.

'Received from Mlle Céline Guérec ...

Meanwhile Rat-face, looking for once somewhat embarrassed, was fumbling for his words.

'We may – er – contemplate several possible solutions.'

Let him 'contemplate' his precious 'solutions'! Did he think he was investigating a crime?

'One of them concerns the family business. Should it be continued or ... ?'

Guérec jerked his head up. This 'solution' came indeed as a bolt from the blue. Never once had any member of his family dreamt of such a thing – that they could conceivably live elsewhere than in the *Maison Guérec*, amongst ships' stores and tackle, in an atmosphere of spices and liqueurs.

And though he himself had left his home, for good avowedly, he could hardly believe his brother-in-law was in earnest. He slewed his eyes round on his sister, expecting to see her looking thoroughly shocked.

Not a bit of it! Her husband's words had evidently taken effect, for she returned his gaze sadly, but composedly.

'Of course,' Émile explained, 'it's all quite in the air so far; we came to no decision. The stock and good-will should fetch quite a good price even under present conditions. And, of course, the family could commute a portion of the purchase price and retain an interest in the business.'

'Did Céline propose this?'

'I don't know which of us brought it up first, but we all considered it. Yesterday afternoon the windows had to be boarded up till the glazier could come. And people kept dropping in on the pretext of wanting to buy something. And, of course, Cauchois, blind to the world as usual, went round the town telling the most fantastic yarns of what had happened.'

It was doubly painful being reminded of all this in the unfriendly atmosphere of an hotel bedroom, but Rat-face was nothing if not persistent.

'Think it over, Jules. You'll see it is the best solution. Don't forget your sisters are getting on in years; it's about time they thought of retiring from business. As for you -' He made a gesture that implied: 'Please yourself.'

'What time is your train back?'

'Just after eight.'

'In that case, I suggest we have some dinner.'

They dined in the hotel restaurant and Guérec took the opportunity of drinking rather heavily; it seemed the only thing to do. Émile followed suit and presently, dropping his pompous manner, became quite cheerful.

'You rascal!' he suddenly exclaimed, with a twinkle in his eye. 'How you must have laughed up your sleeve when I started in about my "8s." Naturally I never dreamt for an instant that it could have been your car.'

For a moment Guérec felt quite sick; but it passed almost immediately. Dropping his bantering tone, Émile went on:

'Just imagine what would have happened if I'd found something out, as I was within an ace of doing. Think of my position! My duty on one side, and the family on the other ...'

'You must have gone through a dreadful time, Jules,' Marthe remarked thoughtfully.

He nodded. As a matter of fact he hardly remembered how he'd felt. Had it been so 'dreadful' as all that? For a few days, perhaps. But, strangely enough, once he'd got to know Marie, he had hardly given any thought to the accident.

'Another bottle,' he said to the waiter.

He was hot, his eyes were smarting. They sat so long over their dinner that his brother-in-law had to take a taxi to the station or they'd have missed their train.

'Well, think it over,' said Émile as they shook hands on the platform. 'Anyhow, your sisters will be coming to see you, I expect, and ...'

'I refuse to see Céline,' he cut in, more out of principle than real feeling.

‘Hush!’ sighed Marthe. ‘Poor Céline!’

But why should she be pitied? Wasn’t it all her fault? Had he asked her to meddle in his affairs?

As he was about to enter the hotel he felt a sudden rush of blood to his head, and instead of turning in he walked down the street. After all, why not seize the opportunity? He was in a big town, alone. He had money in his pocket, and for once, no one would ask him to account for it.

Not since that afternoon at Quimper had he felt this way. On the previous evening he had noticed a café opposite the theatre in which were some women of the kind he wanted. There was an orchestra playing. He walked boldly in.

When he got back to his bedroom it was two in the morning, and he had had a good many more drinks. But he was sober enough to count his money, and he went to bed feeling easier in mind.

CHAPTER VIII

THE first house was too damp. It was at Plouay, in open country, about twelve miles from Quimper. There was a big garden and, pointing to it, Celine said:

‘Anyhow, that will keep you busy, Jules.’

They were all eagerness to launch out on the new life, and full of confidence in the future – with the exception, perhaps, of Françoise, who on leaving Concarneau seemed to have put ten years on to her age.

Still she never complained, and always kept up an appearance of cheerfulness, though one sometimes felt it was an effort for her.

Really it was quite a pleasant house, on the main road, with a garden in front, wrought-iron gates, a graceful portico, eight rooms and a big entrance-hall. They had bought the fields adjoining it and let them to a neighbouring farmer.

What better could they have done? They had to live somewhere. They had thrashed it out together one day at Rennes, at a sort of family conference, and all had agreed that a change of scene was desirable.

Since that morning of hateful memory both of the sisters had come to loathe the sight of the shop, and kept out of it as much as possible. As for Guérec, he hardly knew what he wanted. All he knew was that he had no wish to return to Concarneau, where he might run into Marie at any moment and, in any case, would have had to include Philippe in his crew.

‘As you have the money ...’ Gloaguen reminded them.

Nevertheless it was an effort getting reconciled to the idea. More than half the life of each had been spent with the firm conviction that no change could possibly come into it; and now, lo and behold, in a few days, less than a week, all that had seemed so permanent, so solid, was melting away under their eyes like a dissolving view!

One day red posters, announcing the sale, were pasted on the walls. And then a sort of frenzy came over them. In the past they would have hated the thought of parting with any of their belongings, would have treasured piously even the most useless objects, old clothes they’d never wear again. But now they were seized by a passion to jettison everything that had associations with the past. Now that they were embarking on a new life, why not make a clean sweep of the old? Only Françoise, rummaging in cupboards, saved a few pathetic relics from the holocaust.

‘Still angry with me?’ Céline asked Jules one day.

He found no answer. Like the others, he was living in a sort of dream. And though he bitterly reproached himself for having struck his sister, he could not get Marie out of his mind.

Yet somehow he was glad all that was ended. Yes, it was ‘better that way’, as Marie had put it. Quite possibly under

happier conditions she would have forgotten her grievance against life and blossomed out into an ordinary, cheerful young married woman. But how about him? He doubted if he were suited for the give-and-take of married life. His sisters had always made things too easy for him – spoiled him, in fact; he would have missed their mothering ways.

To get over it as quickly as possible; that was the one thing all were heartily agreed on, and Émile came in very useful, taking charge of all the formalities – a task thoroughly to his taste.

Still, they all shed tears on the day of the sale. But a sale is a depressing business at the best of times. To cheer themselves up they ordered an excellent dinner at the *Café de l'Amiral*.

But now there was this trouble; the house was damp. They had not realized it when moving in. The windows looked west, and on rainy days the rooms were dank as sea-caves; after only two months the wall-paper was going mouldy.

Guérec had tried his hand at gardening, but found it boring, and, for want of anything better to do, had taken to haunting the village pub. He had learned to play Russian Pool, and sometimes played twenty games of it on end.

He could see that Françoise was moping. As for Céline, there was no knowing, for she was busy from morn till night. It was she who repainted the woodwork in the hall.

Émile had bought the car, and he came to visit them from time to time. Now that his wife had received her share of the Guérec inheritance, he had resigned his post at the police station and bought an estate agency whose premises were on the quay. It had always been his ambition to be a house-agent.

Marthe had a daughter, called Françoise. If she had another she would be given Céline's name – as they had done for the boats. And the next would be Julie or Juliette.

Unquestionably the house was too damp. That anyhow was the pretext they all agreed on. It was out of the question spending another winter in it. True, they had bought it, but

as they did not need the capital there was no need to sell; Émile would find a tenant at a good rent. In short, it was an investment.

But where should they go next? Nearer Concarneau or still farther from it? Probably all three had a secret wish to move nearer Concarneau, but when they discussed the matter all professed to be against it.

In any case, Concarneau without their house, without their boats, could never be the same. They wouldn't know what to do with themselves.

They began to study the advertisements in the paper.

'One hundred thousand francs, a going concern, the Victor Steam-Tug Company, Rouen.'

It was Émile who took all the preliminaries upon himself, and he made no less than ten trips to Rouen. Finally they bought the business. The premises consisted of a dark little office near the bridge – for some reason the windows were tinted green – furnished with a small desk and a typewriter. But there were three tugs in commission. And they could see big ships alongside the quays. Really it was like being in an important seaport.

So Guérec again wore his cap with the embroidered peak, though not his clogs. They rented a five-room flat in an old house near the office.

Céline seemed quite pleased with the change.

'Anyhow, there's a theatre and lots of cinemas to amuse us in our old days.'

But they did not wait for their 'old days' to start going to one or the other, as often as two or three times a week. Marthe wrote almost every other day. Marie's name was never mentioned, but Guérec would have given much to learn how she was faring.

Love had nothing to do with this; it was mainly curiosity. How right Céline had been! He hadn't loved Marie; all he

had really felt was the sentimental pity he always felt for any woman down on her luck. He couldn't bear the thought of a woman being unhappy!

Françoise's brown hair was going grey. But what changed the two sisters most was that they had given up wearing Breton costumes, and dressed like everybody else, with hats and grey or brown coats.

'Don't you think, Jules, that they rather over-estimated the profits of the business?' Céline would sometimes ask.

For a year he held his peace, making believe that things would right themselves in time. But one of the tugs was so decrepit that she was not worth the cost of reconditioning, and when one day she grounded on an island in the river, they left her there.

Then a strike broke out in the harbour, and Guérec spent long days of idleness and boredom in the dingy little office.

But what could they do? They might as well be in Rouen as anywhere else. They made two trips to Concarneau, but could not bring themselves to revisit their old home, which was now occupied by a family from Paris, where the man had been manager of a restaurant. They had moved to Concarneau as one of the daughters was an invalid and the doctor had advised sea air.

'I don't think they're doing well,' Émile said. 'They don't fit in here, somehow.'

Looking back, Guérec often found himself wondering how it had really come about. Because of Marie? Or the accident? Or because he had suddenly seen red and struck his sister? No doubt all these were contributory causes. But there was something else, that went much farther back. Though none of them realized it, their family life had reached a stage when the least shock was enough to shatter a state of things to all appearances immutable.

Céline, for instance, seemed to have taken gladly to their new way of living. She genuinely enjoyed her shopping

expeditions in the streets of Rouen, buying new dresses, and going out in the evening. She had bought opera-glasses and a little silver sweet-box which she always took with her to the theatre, and as she watched the play she sucked caramels or nougat.

But, much as life at Rouen appealed to her, they realized they had better dispose of the business in good time, or they might find themselves in the bankruptcy court. So they advertised in the papers. People came from various parts of France, and finally it was a Parisian – again! – who bought the concern.

But they did not leave Rouen at once. All three were afraid of making another false start; nor did they dare to work out their accounts for the past year. They knew they had been drawing on their capital rather heavily, and to make things worse, the farmer at Plouay had proved dishonest.

They refrained even from planning for the future. Perhaps each had a secret wish to be back on the sea-coast, preferably in Brittany. But none of them voiced the wish. They even dallied for a while with a project of settling in the South. Françoise had had a sharp attack of bronchitis and her recovery had been slow. The warm, sunny climate of Provence would be exactly what she needed. But somehow nothing came of it.

The strangest thing, perhaps, was the changefulness of their attitudes towards each other. Guérec, for instance, would go through a phase, lasting several days, of positive animosity towards his sisters, when he inwardly accused them of having wrecked his life, and bemused himself with sentimental memories of Marie.

'Selfish hags!' he would mutter to himself. They had acted as they did only to keep him in their clutches and, whatever girl he had set his heart on, would have thought up some dirty trick to prevent his marrying her.

And during such periods his sisters seemed to reciprocate

his animosity; they sat at meals in sullen silence or exchanged only the most trivial remarks.

Then suddenly, for no particular reason, Guérec would steal a look at one of his sisters – usually Céline – and be struck by her pallor and the dark rings round her eyes; and his mood would change to one of pity and contrition. In the evening he would come home with a little present, perhaps a box of the sweets that she liked best, and spare no pains to prove his devotion to her.

In any case, what was the use of feeling bitter, since, as far as could be foreseen, the three of them were destined to live together for the rest of their days?

It was in one of these contrite moods that, to make amends, he proposed a trip to Paris. As Bretons usually do, they put up in one of the small hotels round Montparrasse Station; and there they made the acquaintance of an old gentleman from Paimpol, with charming manners, who had been living in the hotel for thirty years.

‘If you’re at a loose end,’ he said to Guérec one evening, ‘why not buy an agency?’

‘What sort of agency?’

‘Insurance. The great thing is to choose your district carefully. Just now it’s the suburbs that pay best, as new houses are being run up all the time. I should say that somewhere round about Versailles would be quite promising. Look here, I’ll have a talk with a director of my firm – one of the oldest-established insurance companies in France.’

It was a pure fluke; they’d happened to be dining at the same table. The old fellow was as good as his word, and announced next day:

‘Our Fire and Accident department has a vacancy for Versailles and district which might suit you. You wouldn’t have much canvassing to do, as we’ve a good many policy-holders residing there already. Know Versailles at all?’

‘No.’

'In that case, ladies, I hope you'll let me have the pleasure of showing you round the famous home of our French kings.'

They went there in a car that the old gentleman hired for the occasion. The road led through picturesque little villages where the new houses struck a note of discreet modernity.

'Well, what do you think about it?'

At first they hardly knew what they thought about it. Their only definite feeling was an aversion from returning to Rouen, which they had come to associate with rain and mud, endless worries about the tugs, the gloom of the steep and narrow staircase leading to their flat.

'We'd better ask Émile to look into it.'

'What's the point of dragging Émile all the way here?' Guérec pointed out. 'I don't suppose he knows any more about it than we do.'

What decided them was the discovery of a newly built red-brick villa just outside the city. Small but commodious, it was planned on thoroughly modern lines, having not only an electric range but a number of other labour-saving appliances that so far the sisters had seen only on the pages of catalogues.

A month later they had settled in. Guérec had a business-like green-baize-covered desk, at which he worked for hours, with Céline at his side, for she made a point of giving him a helping hand in this new venture.

No longer could he wear his peaked cap or blue jersey, and he invested in a bowler. Quite naturally he would say as he started out:

'I'm off to collect my premiums.'

One day he bought a second-hand car, for he had forgotten all about the accident. Still, it was Céline who had to do most of the driving, and she almost always accompanied him on his rounds. Françoise seemed unable to shake off her bronchitis and was visibly ageing.

One day a letter came from Marthe in which at last there was a reference to Marie:

'Émile says 'there's no reason why I shouldn't tell you about it. Marie Papin has just got married. Really it was quite a good match for her; her husband is a young fellow who spent his summer holidays last year at Sables Blancs. He lives near Paris, at Corbeil I believe, and his father is a building-contractor.'

On reading this Guérec gave a slight start, and his sisters watched him nervously. But they were reassured when he said:

'I'm very glad for her sake. She deserved it.'

Deserved what? To be a building-contractor's wife?

He and Céline still went to the pictures several evenings a week, but Françoise had got into the way of staying at home and was growing more and more infirm. And in the second winter she had another attack of bronchitis which soon developed into pneumonia. On the seventeenth day she died, in a high fever accompanied by delirium, incapable of recognizing even her brother and sister.

Marthe and her husband came to Versailles for the funeral, and were the only mourners besides Guérec and Céline. Marthe's little girl was beginning to walk.

When they went away, leaving Guérec and his sister to themselves, the house seemed strangely empty, and it took them some time to get used to the new conditions. And gradually a curious life set in, almost like that of a jealous yet devoted married couple; a life of quarrels and makings-up, reproaches and endearments.

Céline once more held the purse-strings, and Guérec had to resort to all sorts of subterfuges to have a few francs for himself. He took to fibbing as he used to when a little boy, but always crumpled up when his sister looked at him in a special way.

They had lost more money lately and went on losing it,

whereas Émile continued rising in the world. He had done very well over a deal in building-land at Le Cabélou, and been nominated a Town Councillor.

At Versailles they had to count every sou; the upkeep of the car ran away with a good deal of money, but it was indispensable for Guérec's rounds.

And Marie? He often thought of her, but only when he was alone, for Céline had an uncanny knack of guessing his thoughts. But every time his eyes fell on her left cheek, he had a rush of pity and contrition. For hadn't she been right? Hadn't she acted for the best?

One Sunday afternoon he began making a little model three-master to put on the mantelpiece under glass, but he never could bring himself to finish it – so heart-sick did it make them both.

Every time there was a ring at the bell, it jarred their nerves, for it wasn't the bell they had heard all their lives at Concarneau. It was the same thing at Low Mass; somehow the service was so different that it seemed unreal.

When Céline peeled potatoes Guérec sometimes caught himself thinking of the potatoes fishermen bring on board with them, and each man nicks his with a special sign before giving them to the boy to cook. For every Breton fisherman insists on eating the potatoes he has brought with him, and no others. And when one of the men has been bullying the boy, the youngster gets his own back by overcooking his potatoes and reducing them to a mash, so that their owner can't be sure ...

Then his thoughts would veer to the ferry and old Louis.

'That reminds me! I must ask Marthe how old Louis is getting on.'

'He must be seventy by now.'

But they never did ask Marthe. Indeed they'd never really meant to. Her answer would only have saddened them, awakened vain regret ...

Why had they acted as they did? Neither had the least idea. There seemed to have been a sort of fatality about it; they were destined to end their days together.

What else could explain the way things had conspired towards this end?

Nothing would have happened had not Guérec followed a street-girl after that committee meeting at Quimper, and if, when driving home, he hadn't run over that poor child.

Nor if, on reaching home, he had made a clean breast of it to his sisters instead of lying.

Nor if he had refrained from speaking to Philippe when he saw him fishing off the sea-wall.

Nor if, on that fateful morning, when Céline came home with her shopping-net, he had stayed outside for a few minutes – long enough to calm down – instead of entering at once and having a row with that drunken sot Cauchois.

Old Cauchois, too, had come to a stupid end. One night, half soused, he had slipped when getting off his boat, and been drowned. He had gone down like a stone, and a diver had had to be employed to retrieve the corpse.

Céline had had her hair cut short, as that went better with the modern hats she now wore. There were a few white strands in it, and Guérec felt a pang of fear each time he saw them.

He was afraid that, like Françoise ...

Céline, like Marthe, looked robust, but lung trouble ran in the family.

Suppose he lost her, what would he do? One thing he was sure of, he couldn't go on living at Versailles, by himself. So, he supposed, he would go back to Concarneau and live with his last surviving sister. It wouldn't be too pleasant; it would mean eating humble pie to Émile all the time, all sorts of petty humiliations. He would be 'Old Uncle Jules' to the children, whom likewise he'd have to humour.

And on fine afternoons he, too, would go fishing from the end of the sea-wall.

But happily all that was in the remote future. Meantime he had Céline. Gazing at her affectionately, he murmured:

‘I say, let’s go to the pictures this evening!’

And made a mental note to buy some caramels, the kind she liked best, for her silver sweet-box.

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